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FERNLEY MANOR.

A NOVEL

BY

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AUTHOR OF

“MY SISTER MINNIE.” “THE POOR COUSIN.”

“OUR GUARDIAN,” &C., &C.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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FERNLEY MANOR.

CHAPTER I.

MARGARET.

“HERE then shall be our resting-place ; here in this lonely but tempting spot we will pitch our tent, Margaret, and see how the flower we have brought from sunnier climes, will flourish in our cold English atmosphere.”

The speaker was an elderly gentleman, of a grave and rather commanding aspect —handsome as far as regularity of feature could make him so, but lacking that expression of superior intelligence which is

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essential to the real beauty of the human countenance.

The person to whom his words were addressed, was a pale and softened, yet improved likeness of himself—a calm eyed, fair, and very quiet-looking girl, decidedly past the first blush of youth, but scarcely reaching that point at which women are supposed to commence the descending road. She smiled pleasantly at her companion's rather high-flown speech, and replied, as she turned from admiring the prospect, to look at him.

"It will be a beautiful home, father, and Edith must learn to love her own country."

"But it will be very lonely ;" the old man said again. "I have chosen it for this reason ; and you had better tell Edith all about it. There are no other country houses within thirty miles, and of course the Fernley people will have nothing to do with us, or we with them. I never will mix in English society again ; it can scarcely be expected of me. If you should marry

hereafter, Margaret, Edith can see more of the world. But at present you must prepare her mind for a life of solitude."

"Edith knows that England is very different from Italy," said Margaret, quietly. "She is fully prepared for the change."

"And do you think she will be happy here?"

"Indeed I hope so. I will do my best to cheer and enliven her. And," (looking round once more on the really charming prospect) "who could pine long, father, in such a home as this?"

"You are a good girl, Margaret," said the gentleman, drawing his daughter's arm within his own, and descending slowly the steps of the broad terrace on which they had been standing. "A very good girl, and when you marry I shall not fear trusting Edith to your guidance."

Margaret only smiled again quietly in reply to this last observation, and then pointing to the sunset, advised their re-

turning at once to the inn at Fernley, where they were to pass the night.

Fernley Manor was an old-fashioned country house that had been uninhabited for nearly twenty years. Its owner (a gentleman who had spent so much money in his youth, that it was necessary for him to economise painfully in his age) lived entirely abroad, sacrificing a small, annual sum, with considerable reluctance, for the purpose of keeping the home of his forefathers in decent preservation ; and this not for any respect he bore the time-honoured dwelling, but because he hoped some day or other to obtain a tenant for it, through whom he should receive a rich per centage for the money thus grudgingly laid out. But in spite of the extreme beauty of the situation, and the many advantages it really offered, the Manor House of Fernley remained long unsought ; and the disappointed proprietor, after having vainly reduced the rent to a mere nominal

sum, and expended nearly half a year's income in advertisements, was just on the point of having it pulled down in disgust, when chance made him acquainted with Major Lascelles, an English gentleman who wished to return to his own country and live as unsociably as he could possibly contrive to do.

Fernley Manor was beyond all question the very place for such a purpose, and the description given of the house by its proprietor, together with the moderate rent, tempted Major Lascelles to leave Florence at once, and (consigning his youngest daughter Edith to the care of a cousin of her mother's in London) journey with his eldest child to the secluded village, where they have been presented to the reader.

It was now about the beginning of autumn, and the rich woods round Fernley were just sprinkled with a few bright gold leaves, that shone amongst the dark masses of green and brown foliage, giving to the scene, in the deep stillness of approaching

twilight, the appearance of some exquisitely painted landscape, on which the eye delights to linger, while the mind conjures up dream-like visions to animate the silent picture. The thick hedge-rows were laden with hazel nuts and black-berries, the slopes were bright with wild flowers, and the green lanes seemed all so mazy and luxuriant, that one scarcely marvelled at the joyous notes that occasionally filled the air with such sudden melody, and then died away amidst the hanging hazel boughs that shaded the narrow paths.

Margaret Lascelles walked at her father's side in silence, enjoying, with an intensity few could understand, the beauties nature had lavished on her own dear country. Eighteen years had passed since she had looked on an English landscape. Eighteen long years she had wandered under skies that, however bright, had little interest for her; and now, with all the recollections of a happy childhood fresh upon her, she walks on calmly and sedately, giving no

outward evidence of the strong and scarcely governable feelings that are swelling at her heart.

But it was an English heart, and so its impulses were in good training, and there was slight fear of any one of them bursting the prescribed bounds.

"I shall have to leave you for an hour to-night, Margaret ;" her companion said, suddenly, "I have to meet the Fernley agent for the purpose of signing the final agreement, and to settle some other matters connected with our new residence. You will be able to amuse yourself during that time."

"Certainly. I will write to Edith, since you think of remaining here another day."

"Ah do so, my dear, and be sure you make her understand distinctly what she is to expect."

This was the letter Margaret Lascelles wrote to her young sister :

“MY OWN DEAREST EDITH,

“ We are obliged to defer our return another day, so I will not keep you in suspense respecting our future home. It is an exquisite spot, and one to which no description of mine could do the least justice. I long for you to see it, Edith, and I shall be wofully disappointed if you feel less enchanted with it than I do. Our father wishes me to impress upon your mind the total absence of society at Fernley. He fears you will miss the social life of Italy, even more than its sunny skies. But my Edith has recourses in herself which may enliven the most solitary existence, and we must all do our utmost to render our English home a cheerful one. If I could paint for you the sweet scene that is spread before me now, with a bright harvest moon shining gloriously over it, I am sure you would acknowledge that your native land is not so cold and barren as it has been described to you. There are rich,

deep woods rising far in the distance, and casting their heavy shadows on the smooth green meadows beneath, and here and there a little stream of running water sparkles brilliantly in the moonlight, like a silver thread giving bright relief to an unilluminated ground. But there is one object that strikes me more than all the rest, either because the moon shines more vividly over that spot, or because it will be such a charming subject for coming into my sketch book at some future day. This is a diminutive rustic bridge spanning one of the widest brooks, and half hidden in the thick brushwood that is springing up on either side. The woman of our inn tells me that it leads to a wild sort of dell more than a mile in extent, and beyond which, stands in solemn loneliness, a hunting box, called 'Heather Lodge,' and to which its proprietor (a proud unsocial Scotchman) generally comes about once in three years.

"Edith, you will not be enchanted with England at first ; but do not suffer yourself

to be discouraged. The gloom and coldness that will strike you so forcibly, are only on the surface. There is abundance of warmth and kindness beneath, for those who have the patience to seek and watch. In two days I hope to be with you again, and you will then tell me your impressions of your English relatives. I fear they will scarcely have time to untaw while you remain amongst them.

“Remember me to the circle in Harley Street, and accept, dear Edith, the fond affection of

“Your sister

“MARGARET.”

CHAPTER II.

EDITH.

THERE was a small family circle assembled at breakfast in Harley Street. There were the father and mother sitting at opposite ends of the large table, and there was a young lady of about five and twenty occupying one side, and a young lady of about three and twenty occupying the other. A vacant chair at some distance from the latter seemed to intimate that an addition to the group was expected.

I will not attempt a description of any of these individuals at present, because you

are going to listen for a short time to their conversation. They are discussing the personal appearance of their young relative, Edith Lascelles, who had arrived the previous evening.

“For my part,” the father says (with that air of indifference elderly gentlemen, engaged in business, usually assume in speaking of young women.) “For my part I think the Major’s daughter rather a fine girl, and she seems monstrously well conducted considering her foreign education.”

Having delivered this opinion Mr. Armstrong drank off his last cup of coffee, looked at his watch, and finding he had yet ample time, helped himself to another slice of beef, and thought he would “try a dish of tea.”

During this interval the eldest Miss Armstrong was telegraphing to her sister across the table, and endeavouring, with some success, to convey an idea of the contempt she felt for her father’s judgment on the

point in question. At length her indignation finds a voice.

“ Really, papa, you must forgive me for being amused at your notion of ‘ a fine girl.’ Why this Edith is an absolute dwarf. Just imagine, Martha, (to her sister,) how Joseph would shriek at such a specimen of a fine girl.”

“ Joseph be hanged !” replied the father, good-humouredly ; “ the young jackanapes ! what should he know about women. Boys of his age have only one mirror through which they look at the fairer portion of creation, and that is their own confounded vanity—Hang it, Loo, your old father’s taste doesn’t deserve to be put in competition with that of a young puppy’s of nineteen.”

“ But Joseph goes so much into general society,” interposed the mother now, “ that really I think he may be allowed to have some powers of discrimination ; and I agree with Louisa, that he would entirely ridicule your notions of a fine girl.”

"You are all as mad as March hares," Mr. Armstrong retorted, with an amused twitching about the corners of his mouth, "this pretty cousin has turned your heads with envy—Upon my soul, women, at the very best, are nothing more than maniacs with lucid intervals—When does Master Joe make his appearance, Mrs. A——?"

"This evening, I hope," replied the lady, with maternal warmth aggravated into excess, by her husband's slighting tone.

"This evening—and how long is this *poor little dwarf* to remain with us?"

"Two days, I fancy."

"Then before the second has expired, I'll bet you a bottle of champagne, or a dozen of gloves, or anything you like, that our precious Joseph will be sighing at her feet, and making, in short, a greater fool of himself than he is at present."

In the midst of the battery of contemptuous and resentful looks, that followed this boldly uttered sentence, the door

opened softly, and Edith Lascelles came into the room.

"I am sorry to be so late," she said, with a considerable degree of quiet ease, as she advanced to take the extended hand of her hostess ; "but I was very tired, and, I believe, fell asleep, after I had been called."

"Don't apologise, my dear," Mr. Armstrong hastened to say, before his lady could speak ; "you see we did not wait for you, so it's of no consequence whatever. Sit down, now you are come, and make a good breakfast."

Edith shook hands with the whole party, and then placed herself in the vacant chair which Martha Armstrong had, with some show of friendliness, drawn a little nearer to her own.

And now began the long string of queries usual on such occasions, as to whether the bed was comfortable, the room quiet, the servants attentive, &c., &c., which are so tiresome, at all times, to an-

swer, and so infinitely vexatious when a well spread table suggests a much more satisfactory manner of employing the fleeting moments.

Edith, either from hunger or some other cause, replied absently to her cousin's questions, and the latter soon gave up the thankless task, and proceeded to the discussion of a few trivial domestic matters with her husband, who was buttoning his coat, and evincing decided impatience to be gone.

"I am sure, Mr. Armstrong, you will forget to call at the wine-merchant's—you always make a point of forgetting everything—and really this is so essential, as Joseph returns to-night. Do, my dear, allow me to tie a piece of silk round your finger, and if I make it red, it will remind you, at the same time, that I want a couple of fine lobsters from Hungerford Market. Fatty, just fetch me my work-box—I will not keep your father a minute."

But, before the work-box could be found, the gentleman had made his escape, and Edith (who had looked up wonderingly) relapsed into the same listless state as before.

“What would you like to do this morning, Miss Lascelles?” asked the lady of the house, when the breakfast things had been removed. “My girls *must* practice for an hour or two, as their music-master comes to-day; but if you care for sight-seeing, I will order the carriage, and take you about myself till luncheon time.”

“What is to be seen in London!” said Edith, quite unconscious of the treason contained in her question.

“What is to be seen in London?” repeated her cousin, measuring the little person before her from head to foot. “Pray, my dear, are you serious in making such an enquiry?”

“Quite,” said Edith. “I am one of the most ignorant beings in the world,”

Mrs. Armstrong did not seem disposed

to dispute this assertion. But she very considerably went over a catalogue of all the most esteemed sights in London, beginning at the tower, and ending with the industrious fleas, who were then in the full zenith of their first triumphant season.

“You are very good,” was the reply, when the list was completed ; “but I feel no curiosity about any of these things ; and if you do not object, I will stay at home, and listen to your daughter’s music.”

“A most extraordinary girl that is, and by no means pleasing in her manner,” was the observation Mrs. Armstrong whispered to her fair, tall daughters, as they laboured together over a difficult duet in an inner apartment. And this opinion was in no degree modified, when half an hour after she found Edith, (whom she had supposed listening admiringly to the elaborate performance in the next room) wrapped in a large Indian shawl, and fast asleep upon her damask sofa.

Mrs. Armstrong’s first feeling was cer-

tainly one of surprise, not unmixed with indignation. But as she stood, for a moment, to gaze at the little curled-up figure, so unconsciously graceful in its attitude, the hidden kindness of her English nature was excited by the discovery of tears on the dark eye-lashes of her young cousin.

“Poor little soul!” she said, half-aloud, “I dare say she’s got her trials like the rest of us. And really now I look at her well, there *is* something rather pretty, and decidedly striking, about her. I’m glad I did not accept Mr. Armstrong’s offer of a bet, for I think it just possible that dear Joe may take a fancy to the little strange thing after all.”

Meantime the ‘little strange thing’ slumbered on calmly enough; and after watching her for some minutes, Mrs. Armstrong went away to the performance of those domestic duties, which not only occupied herself, but gave additional occu-

pation to her servants during the whole morning.

Edith was awake, and looking out of the window, when her elder cousin returned to the drawing-room with some needlework, and without alluding to her stolen nap, the former began speaking of music in general, and of that the Misses Armstrong had been executing in particular.

“They are thought remarkably fine performers,” observed the well-pleased mama, believing Edith only wanted encouragement to pay a compliment.

“Are they?” said the other, simply, as she looked out into the street again.

“But, perhaps you are not much of a judge,” continued Mrs. Armstrong. “I think the major said you had been accustomed to lead an idle sort of a life in Italy.”

“Yes, indeed; I never did anything very great in the way of study. I had such bad health as a child.”

“ Well, my dear, it is not too late to begin even now. You can’t be above twenty, I should suppose ?”

“ I am nineteen.”

“ Are you to have a governess in the country ?”

“ Oh ! Mrs. Armstrong, what a frightful suggestion ! No ! a million times, no !”

“ Then, what, may I ask, *are* you to do, Miss Lascelles ?”

“ What I have done all my life, I fancy ! Amuse myself, when I can—and bite my finger nails when I can’t. Mrs. Armstrong I *have* been taught to sew ; let me sit beside you, and do some of that work.”

With evident reluctance on the part of its owner, a table-cloth was delivered into the hands of the younger lady, who soon proved, by the quiet diligence she now manifested, that industry, however unusual, was not, altogether, an impossibility to her. Mrs. Armstrong looked at her companion

and wondered—and wondered, and looked again ; and was just on the point of giving utterance to some of the worn out common places, respecting female education, that were rising, mist-like, in her brain, when Edith startled her by saying, in the most abrupt and imperative manner,

“ Mrs. Armstrong, tell me about my mother.”

A crimson flush overspread the face of the person thus strangely addressed ; and, after a moment’s pause, she answered the question by another—

“ What do *you* know about her, Miss Lascelles ?”

“ This—” said Edith, looking pale, but quite composed ; “ that she was your first cousin, Mrs. Armstrong, that she was beautiful and admired ; that she left papa soon after I was born—and that they have never met since. All this I have heard through various channels—not from papa or Margaret ; *they* never speak of her to me ; and in days long past, my questions were al-

ways answered by terrible frowns from one, and sighs and tears from the other. It is a forbidden subject between us now ; but my interest in a mother's fate cannot be annihilated by silence. It is right that I should know, at least, whether she is alive or dead ; and some way or other, I *will* know. Can *you*—will you, tell me, Mrs. Armstrong ?”

“ My dear, it distresses me to see you so excited about a subject that has long been consigned to oblivion,” the virtuous matron replied cautiously. “ Besides, I really know nothing about your unfortunate mother, except what all the world knows, and what you appear to have learnt yourself. As girls we mixed in different sets ; and though I heard many say that Emily Brereton was a beauty, I never discovered myself, that she was anything more than a clever, lively, coquette.”

“ But that was prior to her marriage,” said Edith, fixing her eyes steadily on the face of the speaker.

“Yes ; she refused one or two tolerable offers ; and, at last, to the surprise of everybody, accepted Major Lascelles, a widower with two daughters. The youngest died before you were born ; but I suppose Margaret has told you all this ?”

“Oh, I knew there was another girl—but that does not greatly interest me. Pray go on about mama.”

“I have nothing more to tell, Edith. You are old enough to understand that a woman who leaves her husband, lays herself open to the harshest censure of the world. For my own part, I wish to judge charitably. Your father, I always heard, was a strange man ; very difficult to live with—and extremely jealous of his young and pretty wife. She was said to have a violent temper, and he an unforgiving one ; so it is probable that angry words parted them—and that pride has kept them asunder. My dear, you are making a sad mess of that table-cloth !”

Edith put it aside.

“But this is not the opinion of the world in general,” she said in an excited voice—“the harsh censure you spoke of must comprehend some graver charge than this—let me hear all now.”

Her earnestness appeared irresistible, for Mrs. Armstrong replied quickly.

“You are right—the world has ascribed the worst motives to her sudden disappearance, and as your father never contradicted the reports that speedily got abroad, her name became a forbidden thing amongst her own connections, and something worse in society. It is but fair to add, however, that a few have defended her throughout, and maintain that the truth will be discovered at last. I hope sincerely they may be right—but, for my own part, I don’t believe she will ever be heard of again.”

There was one other question trembling on Edith’s lips ; but at that instant, the

door was opened abruptly, and the words "luncheon is on the table, mamma," from the fair Louisa, turned Mrs. Armstrong's thoughts in a totally different channel, and made any continuance of the subject at that time, a moral impossibility.

CHAPTER III.

NEW ARRIVALS.

EDITH had gone to her room about half an hour before the dinner hour, for the purpose of arranging her hair, and substituting a lace collar for the plain linen one she always wore in the morning. She had been told that the family would be quite alone, and consequently meditated no further addition to her toilette. Indeed, her thoughts just now were very far removed from vanity, and its many handmaidens. She was reflecting soberly enough on the

conversation she had recently held with Mrs. Armstrong, and wondering (by no means for the first time) whether that mother—who had already occupied so much of her thoughts, and whose name was a forbidden theme—had still an actual existence, or was a dim remembrance only, disgraced in every mind save that of her unknown daughter.

Edith Lascelles had many faults and follies, as you will hereafter see ; but she was too young, and had too much refinement of heart, to be infected by the vague whispers she had occasionally heard concerning this mysterious parent. To her, there was a fascination in this very mystery, although an ardent desire to fathom it had long been included in those day-dreams and yearnings that filled her mind, to the exclusion of more wholesome, mental food.

On the present occasion, her visionary speculations were destined to come to an untimely end, by the sudden entrance of

Martha Armstrong, attired in a manner that was eminently calculated to bring down the most romantic thoughts to a level with this every-day world of vanity and folly.

Her dress was of a bright pink *barège*, flounced quite to the waist, with exceedingly short sleeves, and what the English call "very low in the neck." A superabundance of stiff petticoats deprived her figure of the little grace that nature had given it, and, with the variety of bracelets, brooches, and chains that adorned her person, reminded one very forcibly of a huge pincushion, in a fancy bazaar, doing service as a supporter of all the showiest trinkets in the stall.

Edith glanced up at her quickly, and then stooped to hide the smile it was quite impossible to restrain. Miss Armstrong spared her the necessity of saying anything, by immediately speaking herself.

"My dear Miss Lascelles, the dinner-

bell will ring in a few minutes, and you have not yet begun to dress."

"I am quite ready," said Edith, giving one look into the glass, and smiling again as she did so; "but where are *you* going, with that magnificent toilette."

"No where," (with a surprised expression.) "This is my every-day dinner dress—I should have thought it would have been terribly dowdy by the side of your foreign fashions."

"Quite the reverse, you see. Our fashions are of the simplest kind."

"And you really intend to dine and spend the evening in that high, dark dress? You must excuse my commenting on it; but it does seem so very odd."

"Your mamma told me you would be quite alone, so I never dreamt of making any change, except my collar and cuffs. If my appearance shocks any of your English prejudices, you must put me at a side table, or in the nursery, if you have one."

“ Goodness gracious, what an idea! I am sure you look so nice as you are, that it does not signify in the least. If you like, though, I can lend you a couple of short, stiff petticoats, which would give a little more style to your figure.”

“ Thank you,” said Edith ; “ but I am not an admirer of style.”

And this was perfectly true, if Miss Martha Armstrong was to be taken as a specimen of what she recommended.

Astonished more than offended at this refusal of her generous offer, the young lady continued—

“ It is so fortunate for you that Joseph returns to-night, for you would otherwise, I fear, have found staying with us rather a dull affair. Louisa and I go out a good deal ; but we have very little company at home, because manma thinks it too expensive.”

Edith looked indifferent ; but her cousin either did not notice this, or liked talking too well to care for it if she did.

“Yes,” she continued, as they went down stairs together, “nothing could be more lucky, as Joseph can take you about everywhere ; and, as he has learnt French, you can talk scandal, or politics, or sentiment together, without the slightest fear of mamma or papa understanding you.”

“Is your brother at college ?” said Edith, for the sake of saying something.

“Oh, no ; he is intended, I believe, for a country gentleman, because he has no particular fancy for any profession. He was at Eton, for a short time ; but they must have neglected him shamefully, for he made no progress in his studies ; and now he is at a private tutor’s, which he likes much better, because he lives with the family, and they are rather gay people.”

Having now arrived at the drawing-room where the rest of the party were assembled, Edith was spared for the present any further details concerning the fascinating Joseph ; and she amused herself, till dinner was announced, in counting the number

of colours Mrs. Armstrong had contrived to display in her very elaborate toilette.

Mr. Armstrong (*père*) although an important personage in his own private circle, was not a man calculated to inspire any particular interest in strangers—for he was simply one of a class, a fair, but common-place specimen of the middle-aged, bustling, pompous, prejudiced Englishman; good tempered and jovial when everything goes right, and very bitter and snarling when anything goes wrong, generally, on these last occasions venting his spleen by railing against foreigners, because they are safer objects of attack than his own family, and there is here a wider scope for abuse and irony.

It happened that this day Mr. Armstrong senior (who was a junior partner in a large banking-house) had experienced some little *contretemps* in the city, and returned home quite in a November mood, having entirely forgotten all his wife's commissions. The consequence of this was a sharp war of

words between the offender and the offended, which lasted till the joint was removed ; when the gentleman finding he was likely to get the worst of it, prudently retired from the field, and turned his weapons of attack against the state of things in general ; which he declared were about as bad as they could be, and against all foreigners, and foreign countries in particular, which he swore were not even fit for Christians to speak of.

Edith listened at first in perfect indifference ; then, as the gentleman grew warmer, in amazement ; and finally, as he appeared to direct his observations principally to herself, in some indignation, and growing contempt for her countrymen.

“ I say,” vociferated the now excited speaker, “ that Frenchmen are nothing more than monkeys with the gift of speech ; they dress like monkeys, they walk like monkeys, they hop and bow like monkeys ; and they govern their precious country about as well as a set of monkeys would

govern the world. If either of my daughters was to give me a Frenchman, or an Italian, or a German (for there's no difference) for a son-in-law, I'd horsewhip her, if she was forty years old."

Edith seeing she was expected to say something, observed that there could not be much danger, since the young ladies knew their father's sentiments on the subject.

"Danger, Miss Lascelles, did you say danger?" he continued, swallowing a bumper of port to calm his agitated spirits. "There had better not be any danger, I can tell them, or we'll see who's master here—James," (to the servant who was bringing him a second plate of stewed pears *à la Française*), "what's the meaning of that confounded noise on the stairs?"

The servant vanished.

"Perhaps its dear Joe," said the mother, half rising from her chair, but re-seating herself on meeting a glance from her husband, which contained a command that

there might be no disturbance while dinner was on the table.

“If you please, sir,” said James, re-entering the room, “its Master Joseph and another young gentleman, who have just arrived, and are carrying their boxes and portmanteaux up stairs.”

“*Their* boxes and portmanteaux !” exclaimed the papa, darting a look of scowling enquiry at his wife ; “ what the deuce, Betsy, has that young jackanapes been about now ?”

“ Brought a friend, perhaps, to dinner and spend the evening,” suggested the mother, timidly. “ If so, my dear, we must, of course, be civil to the young gentleman.”

“ Go, and find out what it is, and who ?” said Mr. Armstrong to the servant in attendance. “ I don’t approve of such liberties in my children ; and I’ll teach Master Joseph to bring his friends here without leave !”

Even as the last words were uttered, the

door opened, and the heir of all the Armstrongs—a tall, stiff, but rather handsome, youth, ushered into the room, and introduced, as his particular friend, “ Monsieur Eugène de la Tour,” who had kindly consented to spend the holidays with him.

CHAPTER IV.

JOSEPH AND HIS FRIEND.

MONSIEUR EUGENE DE LA TOUR, little dreaming of the unqualified abuse that had just been lavished on his country and his countrymen, advanced with a most graceful bow towards the table, apparently quite unconscious of the coldness, amounting to incivility, that marked the aspect of his friend's father ; and much more interested, to speak truth, in examining the faces of the young ladies, than in ascertaining the amount of welcome he was likely to receive from his host and hostess—for, with

the happy self-esteem of his compatriots; Monsieur Eugène never permitted himself to doubt that his society conferred pleasure on every one who was fortunate enough to obtain it.

The easy assurance of his manner surprised Mr. Armstrong into giving him a tolerable welcome, though the Englishman still shone out in his clouded and somewhat threatening countenance. Edith observed, however, that in spite of this, and what had gone before, both Louisa and Martha Armstrong smoothed their hair, and sat more upright in their chairs than they had previously done ; and that the latter immediately slipped one of her white shoulders, in a negligent manner, out of the pink *barège*, and assumed a look of sublime contempt for all terrestrial things.

Yet there was nothing in the young Frenchman's outward aspect in the least calculated to inspire admiration or command respect. He was of almost dwarfish stature, and totally devoid in form and fea-

ture of that comeliness which women love —perhaps it was to this circumstance that he owed Mr. Armstrong's toleration of his presence, for though all men will deny it, there is no doubt that most of the lords of the creation prefer extending their patronage and hospitality to those of their own sex, whom they feel certain no woman can admire.

Be this as it may, the master of the house gradually thawed towards his foreign guest, who spoke English remarkably well; and by the time the ladies left the dining-room, Eugene's fascinations, or ugliness, or his own port wine, had produced on Mr. Armstrong's temper such a very pleasing effect, that he was once more the jovial, good-humoured, facetious host, amiably desirous that all around him should be as happy and comfortable as himself.

I will not intrude upon the ladies' private discussions in the drawing-room, which contained about as much, and no more sense or wisdom, than such 'after dinner

discussions generally do—I wish you to accompany me to Edith's sleeping apartment, where she had retired to communicate in a letter to her sister the impressions made upon her by her English relatives. One short passage will suffice to show you of what nature these impressions were.

“ It seems to me, Margaret, that I have suddenly descended into a new world, the aspect of which (I candidly avow) delighteth me not at all. Are these people really eccentricities, or have I been living all my life in dream-land, and only now alighted upon the real, every-day earth? If this is indeed the case, if I am henceforth to do as they do, and feel as they feel, if this cold English air is to wither up all lofty sentiment, all the poetry of existence, and convert us into mere animated machines, capable of deriving pleasure or amusement from the trivialities that even children ought to scorn—if this is indeed so, I fear, Margaret, that it will be very

long before those words which excite such enthusiasm in you—‘*I dwell among mine own people*’—will produce any other effect than one of disgust on me.”

It was some satisfaction to Edith, when her letter was finished, to reflect on the discrimination which had led her so quickly to fathom the characters of the people she was with. Without being vain (in the usual meaning of the word) of her own judgment and abilities, she had an exceedingly clear consciousness that her intellect was not a common one, and this consciousness unfortunately often led her to form a wrong estimate, not only of herself, but of others.—Stupidity was to Edith Lascelles a crime never to be forgiven, and cleverness on the contrary covered a multitude of sins.

But just now she was really unhappy, and for a cause so natural that it would be cruel to look out for her faults, instead of pitying her distress. Sitting at that high dingy window, gazing down on a sombre

London streets, uncheered by a single ray of the blessed sun, who could blame her for the tears that fell, in thinking of the bright land she had left, with its enchanted aspect of smiling gladness? The contrast was appalling—it made Edith shudder, and turn away with an expression of gloom that sat strangely upon her almost childish features.

In this mood she might have returned to the drawing-room, and remained dejected and miserable during the whole evening, without giving more than a passing thought to any of the people around her, had not a slight incident occurred, which by awaking one of the strongest passions of her nature, not only imparted an active interest to the present, but exercised a still more active influence over her future destiny.

It happened that the room into which Monsieur de la Tour's luggage had been hastily carried, adjoined the one that Edith occupied; and the walls being

exceedingly thin, every word, not spoken in a whisper, could be distinctly heard from one to the other. Just as Miss Lascelles opened her door to go out, a loud laughing on the stairs proclaimed the approach of the young men, and not wishing to meet them, she went back into her own apartment, intending to remain there till they were safe in the next room. The first words of their conversation, which she could not avoid hearing, arrested her curiosity, and she stayed to enjoy it all.

“I can’t believe a syllable,” Joseph Armstrong was saying, in a bantering tone to his companion, “upon my honour, I think you’re only joking—Loo and Patty are well enough, and I dare say will get very decent husbands, one of these days, if I give myself any trouble about it ; but hang it ! my good fellow, they ’re not to be compared to that little fairy down stairs, no more than you ’re to be compared to—ah, who shall I say ? the Appollo Belvidere now, or the Duke of Wellington.”

“I thank you, very much, Master Joseph,” replied his friend, in a voice that struck Edith, as anything but friendly. “You do pay such charming compliments, it is quite admirable; but you must permit me to say again, that I find your sisters quite handsome, elegant, *distinguè* young females, and the little one whom you call ‘fairy,’ I find insignificant, small, baby-like, and not to my taste in any way.”

Edith bit her lip and felt the flush of indignation cover her pale cheek. “The miserable dwarfish boy! how did he dare even to breathe her name—*his* taste indeed, yet it was too ridiculous to excite anger; she should laugh in scorn at any other time, if she were anything less unhappy than at present—it was absurd to suppose that she *could* be angry at such contemptible folly and impertinence.”

All very fine, Miss Edith Lascelles, and highly satisfactory to yourself; but that flush did not come upon your pretty face for nothing, and as for laughing, depend

on it a woman is never less inclined for such recreation, than when she has the misfortune to hear by accident her personal charms depreciated.

Joseph Armstrong spoke next, and the listener grew more and more attentive.

“Well then, your taste is not so good as I thought it—that’s all I’ve got to say ; except that it will be no manner of use you’re taking a fancy to Loo or Patty, for the governor hates Frenchmen like the deuce, and I expect he’d just as soon have Beelzebub for a son-in-law as you, or any other foreigner in the world.”

“Your observations, Master Joseph,” replied Eugène, in a voice of suppressed anger, “are always in such admirable taste, that I should never have suspected you of the bad taste you display in admiring Mademoiselle Edith.”

Whether Mademoiselle Edith understood the irony of this speech or not, I am unprepared to say, but it is very certain that Master Joseph did not, and that he re-

turned to the subject with renewed enjoyment.

“ Well now, upon my honour, I declare you are too hard upon me, and my pretty little cousin, whom I intend seriously to patronise—so you had better be civil to her, or you and I shall fall out—not too civil, mind you, old boy ! for, in spite of what you say about the girl, I wouldn’t answer if she made soft eyes at you, for you’re not becoming over head and ears—you understand, I say ?”

“ There is nothing very difficult of comprehension in your language,” replied the other, with his slow, measured pronunciation ; “ but set your heart at rest—the small lady down stairs might make soft eyes, as you call them, at me for ever, and yet she should obtain no smile in return. Let us go to your sisters now.”

Edith opened the door softly, and had reached the bottom of the stairs before they came out of their room. When

the young men joined the family, she was seated, calm and pale, with a book of engravings in her hand.

Mrs. Armstrong immediately seized upon her son, and overwhelmed him with a multitude of trivial questions, in which her two daughters joined her.

“Was he perfectly happy with his present tutor? what was the wife like? what sort of dinners did they give? who did they visit?” and a dozen other enquiries of equal magnitude, which Joseph answered cheerfully, and with considerable attention to details, often applying to his friend (who was a fellow pupil) for confirmation of his own statements.

At length, to Edith’s relief, Mr. Armstrong came in from the dining-room, and tea and coffee promised some slight break in this most tedious of domestic gossip.

“Come, Joe,” said the father, sitting down amongst them, “we must have a specimen of your French, my boy—you

and Monsieur there, ought to give us a lesson to-night. What do you think of my son's accent, Monsieur ?”

“It is quite unique, I assure you,” replied the young Frenchman, feeling pretty secure, at present, in the indulgence of his satire.

“I'm glad to hear it, Joe ; you must talk to your cousin—she is half a foreigner, you know ; and none of us, at home, make much hand of the parley-voing.”

“I'm sure,” said Joseph, looking sulky, “I'm not going to bother myself about any language but my own, when I'm out of school—that would be a great hardship, I think.”

“Ha, ha, my boy, you've not much idea of hardships yet, I see ; but just put that phrase into French, and then I'll excuse you for the rest of the evening ; and we'll get up a dance, or something to make you all merry.”

The junior Armstrong had a strong passion for dancing, and this for reasons

good ; so though not much addicted to obedience in general, he made an effort on this occasion to comply with his worthy parent's request ; and after due consideration brought forth with an accent that might well be called unique, "*Cela serait un grand dur vaisseau je pense.*"

Edith was not quite proof against this ; she put down her book hastily, and walked to the window, leaving Joseph to the loud commendations of his admiring relatives, and the quiet satire of his foreign friend. This latter joined her in a few minutes.

"Mademoiselle finds something interesting in the street, probably," he began, in his softest voice. "Are you fond of Punch and Judy, Miss Lascelles ?"

Edith's eye flashed as she turned towards the speaker.

"No," she said, in a tone as measured as his own, without its softness, "but I would rather look at that puppet show than at a dressed up monkey, or a dancing dog. The most ridiculous caricature of nature,

is less distasteful to me than nature itself misshapen, or represented in a repulsive form."

Eugène smiled as blandly as if he had just received a personal compliment, and approaching nearer to Edith, asked her what she thought of her cousin Joseph, and his talent for languages. Again her reply came slowly and distinctly.

"Neither would I choose him for a bosom friend, nor make a butt of him, while sharing the hospitality of his father. Now Monsieur de la Tour return to the tea-table, and leave me to enjoy my puppet show alone—I seldom take tea."

There was an imperiousness in her tone that left the other no better choice than to obey, but Edith was perfectly right in supposing that she had made herself a very prominent place in his thoughts; and she preferred that at present this place should have no sunshine about it.

The instant the tea things had disappeared, Joseph vociferated loudly for the

promised dance, and his mother anxious to see him display the only accomplishment in which he excelled, warmly seconded the motion. So tables and chairs were rolled in all directions, and Louisa Armstrong volunteered to play the first quadrille, on condition that her sister took the musician's part in the first polka.

Joseph was now in the highest spirits, and he solicited the honour of becoming his cousin's partner with an air that plainly intimated he considered himself the condescending party. Edith felt more amused than angry at this absurdity, for she had measured Master Joe's intellect at the first glance, and knew that if she chose it, the silly boy could be transformed into one of the meekest of her slaves. Whether such a state of things would be desirable, must be an after consideration, depending on the airs he gave himself—at present she contemplated making him useful in another way.

Monsieur Eugène, as the partner of the

tall, stout Patty, appeared even more diminutive and insignificant than he had done before, but the impression he made on strangers must have differed essentially from the opinion he had formed of himself, to judge at least by the beaming look of complacency that overspread his features as he capered through the figures of the quadrille, causing Mr. Armstrong to whisper in a tone of triumph to his wife that his comparison respecting monkeys was being illustrated to perfection.

Whatever capabilities Edith's partner possessed for dancing, he certainly could not boast of many for conversation, otherwise, his admiration of his pretty cousin would have induced him to make some attempt to interest her, during the very favourable opportunity he now enjoyed. That he preserved a rigid silence, must be attributed, I think, partly to this deficiency in mental resources, and partly to the very severe attention he was bestowing on his

feet, which was excusable, inasmuch as all the talent he was gifted with, lay therein.

But Edith, not being able to amuse herself in the same way, suddenly roused her silent companion from his deep abstraction, by saying, in a low voice—

“You have chosen a strange person for a friend, I think. Is Monsieur de la Tour amiable?”

Joseph was awake in a moment.

“Oh, he is an odd fellow, I know, and not over and above amiable; but as all the other boys hated him, and he took a wonderful fancy to me, I could n’t very well help asking him here for the holidays. Poor fellow! he’s quiet and harmless, and you know, Miss Lascelles, one must be a little civil to those who are fond of us.”

“Certainly,” said Edith, wondering how much higher cousin Joseph would succeed in pulling his shirt collar, which he had even now brought (in his self-importance) quite close to his ears. “Certainly one

must ; and of course your friend will be very grateful for your kindness."

"Oh yes, he'd better, or he and I shall fall out, and then he'll be badly off, I can tell him, for he's got another year to stay in England, and nobody is likely to ask him out, except myself, unless Alick Boisragon returns from Scotland—and he's so good natured, that he'll do anything. Engène is always boasting of a visit he paid last winter to Alick's friends in Devonshire,"

"Who is Alick Boisragon ?" asked Edith, as she perceived Monsieur de la Tour looking earnestly at her and her cousin.

"He was a pupil of Mr. Burkitt's before I went there ; and a mighty favourite with everybody. He came on a visit last half, and I was quite taken with him myself—indeed I should have asked him here instead of the Frenchman, only he was going to Scotland to stay some time with a rich cousin ; and he did n't know when he would be back."

“What is the age of this paragon?”

“Oh he must be twenty at least—perhaps more—I dare say he’ll marry in Scotland, for he’s one of the handsomest fellows I ever saw—such a contrast to somebody—you understand?”

“Perfectly—I suppose this *somebody* is very clever?”

“Well, they say he is, but for my part I never discovered it, and I’m pretty sharp too in general.”

“Is he vain?”

“I believe you—as lucifer—just look at him now—did you ever see such a fright?”

“He is unfortunate,” replied Edith, and as the quadrille was now finished, Joseph, was left to interpret this expression in his own way.

The sisters having changed places, a polka was immediately called for, and Eugène neglecting the fair Louisa came up to Edith with a most humble and obsequious bow.

“Mademoiselle must not bestow all her

favours on the happy cousin, I beg for one polka only."

"I never dance it," was the reply, and as the speaker turned away, a shudder, so slight as to be rather felt than seen, passed over her, and Eugène with a momentary blanching of his thin lip, walked towards Louisa Armstrong, and was speedily whirling her round the room, with all the animation for which his countrymen are remarkable.

When Joseph had had enough of dancing, his sisters executed several difficult duets, both vocal and instrumental, and the young foreigner applauded them to their hearts content.

"I am sorry you don't play or sing, my love," said Mrs. Armstrong, condescendingly to Edith, who was again amusing herself with the book of engravings.

"Pardon me, I do both occasionally ; but my fingers are out of practice now."

"Oh really," exclaimed both the young

ladies, "we had no idea of it—mama, you must insist upon her playing something."

"I will sing if you like." Edith said, going towards the piano. "We do little else but sing in Italy."

What a wild, thrilling, untutored voice it was—how full of rich and melancholy sweetness—how fraught with tales of the bright land where its powers had been first awakened—how exquisite and subduing in its girlish freshness. Even the cold English natures of Edith's listeners were warmed into enthusiasm, and forgetfulness of rivalry, as they experienced, with silent wonderment, the effect that a human voice could produce.

"Bravo, my dear—bravo," exclaimed Mr. Armstrong, (who, though he would not have known if every note had been out of tune, was still conscious of having been more softened than he had ever been since the day Mrs. A. had consented to be his—and that was nine and twenty years ago)

“Upon my word, you’re a perfect St. Cecilia. Louisa and Martha must hide their diminished heads for the future—Joe, what do you think of that?”

Joseph’s open mouth was a valuable commentary in itself; and Mrs. Armstrong and her daughters frankly expressed their astonishment and admiration.

Monsieur Engène alone remained mute; but when Edith passed him, in returning to her seat, he looked up for a moment, and muttered, in a voice that she only could hear, the single word—“Syren.”

CHAPTER V.

JOSEPH IN LOVE.

MAJOR LASCELLES was detained at Fernley, by business connected with his recent purchase, several days longer than he had anticipated, and Margaret employed this time in exploring the woods and lanes round their new home, and writing long letters to her sister Edith, whom she pictured as suffering a perfect martyrdom amidst comparative strangers, and shut out from all those glories of nature which they both alike appreciated.

But although Edith had few sympathies with her present companions, and disliked London more and more every day, she had managed to create an interest for herself, that however unworthy and ill-judged, effectually kept away the *ennui* she would otherwise have experienced.

You will have seen already that self-esteem was one of Edith's besetting sins—it was a darling passion, and not to be offended with impunity. Engène de la Tour had dared to question her fascinations—he, a misshapen, miserable atom of a man, had presumed to doubt her powers of captivation, and therefore he must be made to feel their sting. But to render her victory more triumphant, and prolong what was really an amusement to her, she resolved to goad him into hatred first, and then draw him gently, but surely, to her feet. He should crawl in the dust—he should bow his forehead to the earth—he should despise himself for the abject love he owned, and yet love the more for

this self-contempt ; and when all was accomplished, when the presumptuous boy had become a trembling worshipper, and learned to exist only in her smiles, then would she spurn him from her, with long gathering scorn, and taunt him with his former insulting words.

Such was the object that Edith Lascelles proposed to herself, as a remedy against vain regrets, and a means of feeding the hungry places in her mind, till fate should send them a more tempting banquet.

I do not wish to say one word in vindication of her character or conduct, for I am painting a most imperfect being ; but you must not pronounce her utterly worthless on account of the foolish game she was going to play. There was much levity, much recklessness in Edith's nature ; but her heart was pure and warm, and contained within its secret recesses many of woman's noblest attributes. Whether these would be nurtured into life and vigour, or perish through the multitude of weeds

that grew around them, time and circumstance alone could decide. Let us follow her patiently along the winding path of life, pity her when her footsteps turn astray, and ever bear in mind that we ourselves are pilgrims on the same journey, with feet as liable to stumble, with eyes as likely to be dazzled, and with judgments as feeble and imperfect as hers.

Joseph Armstrong was not long in fulfilling his father's prediction, and yielding up his boyish heart into the keeping of his bewitching cousin ; but this conquest had been too easy, and the captive was too insignificant, to afford Edith any strong gratification. She was a little amused at the mother's anxiety, and intense watchfulness of her precious boy ; but, beyond this, it excited small interest, except as a means of advancing the object on which she had set her heart.

Poor Joseph, like all very youthful lovers, was jealous even of his own shadow,

if it came nearer to the object of his adoration than himself ; he was jealous of everybody and everything, but, above all, he was jealous of his sprightly friend, and wept in spirit, daily and hourly, over the infatuation that had led him to bring a stranger to his father's house.

Not that Eugène ever expressed any warmer admiration of Edith than he had done at first, or strove to monopolise her attention, or gazed at her with looks of love—but he was four or five years older than Joseph ; he professed to understand women ; and Edith herself had once asked if he were not clever. What more could any idolator of nineteen require to place him on the rack ?

Miss Lascelles having remarkably keen eyes, saw exactly how matters were, and lost no opportunity of expressing to her lovesick cousin the contempt and aversion with which his friend inspired her. This answered the double purpose of soothing

the first, and irritating the last ; for, of course, every word was eagerly repeated, as Edith knew, and intended it should be. But Eugène studiously avoided betraying any outward sign of mortification ; in manner, he was gay and animated to absurdity, and flirted with the two sisters as Frenchmen alone can flirt, distinguishing each by turns, yet giving no offence to the other, swearing all things, and meaning none, making his attentions necessary, though exciting no false maiden hopes, and creating no maternal fears. Truly, it was no fool's head that nature had set upon those ill-fashioned shoulders, and Edith reflected with satisfaction that she had an adversary whose defeat would do some credit to her skill.

Mr. Armstrong, not being much at home, saw little of what was going on, and, indeed, he rarely interfered in anything unconnected with business, perfectly satisfied with his wife's capabilities for managing her grown-up children. But there were

occasions when it was expedient to call his manly judgment into council, and Mrs. Armstrong (to her credit be it said) was never backward, when such emergencies occurred, in soliciting the advice of her honoured lord and master. I will not undertake to declare that she always availed herself of these valuable counsels ; but then (as she said) she had paid him the compliment of consulting him ; and that was as much as any husband had a right to expect.

Edith Lascelles had been their guest for nearly a week, when, one evening, having seen all the young people safely deposited in the drawing-room, Mrs. Armstrong returned to the dinner table where the master of the house was sitting alone with his port ; Taking a chair beside him the lady began thus—

“ My dear, I wish to consult with you about a little matter that is worrying me just now. Can you favour me with your serious attention ?”

“Certainly, my love, certainly. I suppose it is relative to the new curtains for the breakfast room?”

“No, Mr. Armstrong, it is as far remote from curtains as possible. The mother of a family may be supposed, I should think, to have graver cares, occasionally, than those connected with furniture or house-keeping—but it is so like you to treat my anxieties with contempt!”

“My dear, pray go on with your story, or I shall not get my nap before tea time.”

“Good gracious! what perfect brutes men are! always thinking of their animal enjoyments. Well, Mr. Armstrong, I will not detain you long. I am uneasy about Joseph.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“My dear, he is evidently in love; you remember you said he would be—and so far you were right—and the girls and myself were wrong. But that is not the question—the question is—what is to be done?”

“With whom?—Joseph or the lady?”

“Oh! pray be serious for once, Mr. Armstrong; I assure you the poor boy is quite unhappy; and what confirms me in my belief that it is really growing into a serious attachment is, that he sent away his pudding untouched to-day; and I never knew Joe, well or ill, refuse roly-poly pudding before.”

Mr. Armstrong swallowed two bumpers of port—during which process, his wife looked on with evident signs of disapprobation and surprise.

“Well!” (in rather a sharpened tone),
“have you no remark to offer?”

“My dear, what on earth, remains for me to say?” replied the gentleman, in a slightly thick, and decidedly drowsy, tone.
“If the young man has refused roly-poly, it appears to me that this clinches the matter. He is, beyond all question, in the last stage of the disease; so take a glass of wine, Betsy, and we’ll drink his health—

Joey Armstrong! (raising another bumper to his lips) and God bless him!"

I am quite sure that all sensible wives will make allowances for the state of wrathful indignation which Mrs. Armstrong got into at this stage of the domestic conference. It seems to me, that nothing could be more moderate than the terms of severe reproof in which she endeavoured to rouse her sleepy lord to a sense of his paternal duties; and that she was perfectly justified in calling him a "most heartless and unnatural father"—a "selfish, brutal husband," and a "disgrace to the position he filled."

Having partly succeeded by these violent, but necessary measures, in recalling his attention to the subject she wished to discuss, Mrs. Armstrong again begged to know what was to be done; and the husband, who (as I before hinted) was pretty well accustomed to these cabinet councils, and desired, moreover, on the present occasion, to cut the matter short, conside-

rately suggested that his wife should be guided by her own judgment.

“Especially,” he rather thoughtlessly added, “as that’s what you will be sure to come to in the end.”

The lady’s indignant reply to this most illiberal assertion I shall not detail at full length. Perhaps Mr. Armstrong was not to be entirely condemned in thinking it might have been abridged with advantage, as the pith of it was assuredly contained in the last impressive sentence, viz.,

“But now the whole matter lays in a nutshell. If there is no objection to this attachment (and as the girl will have ten thousand pounds, I can see none myself) we had better ask her to stay during Joe’s holidays. This will make him happy for the present, and the future must take its chance—Are we agreed, Mr. Armstrong?”

“Oh, certainly, my dear, certainly—and now do let me get my nap.”

That same evening Mrs. Armstrong gave

such a very pressing invitation to Edith to prolong her stay, that the latter agreed to write immediately to her father on the subject. The well pleased mother naturally set down this ready acquiescence to her son's account ; and the son himself, when he heard of it, committed serious injuries on his shirt collar, and consumed an injudicious quantity of jam tarts at supper.

CHAPTER VI.

EDITH'S VICTORY.

PASSING over the month that Edith, with her father's permission, spent in Harley Street, I shall bring my reader at once to the day before the termination of her visit, and the very morning that Joseph and his friend were to return to Mr. Burkitt, and the study of the dead and living languages.

Mrs. Armstrong and the sisters had found so much to do in the way of packing on this occasion, that Edith was left alone in the drawing-room, for what seemed to

her an exceedingly weary time. Monsieur de la Tour had gone out immediately after breakfast, and Joseph was supposed to be mourning in his own room.

Miss Lascelles, not being gifted with a large stock of patience, and having essayed in vain to go to sleep, at last opened the piano and began trying over some English songs that belonged to her cousin Louisa. Finding one that pleased her, she sang it two or three times, quite unconscious that the door had opened since she began and admitted a most attentive listener. A deep, genuine sigh made her start and turn round suddenly.

“*Ah, mademoiselle, continuez je vous en prie—c’est pour la dernière fois.*”

“Pray how long have you been here, Monsieur de la Tour? believe me I had no idea of wasting my singing on you.”

“Speak not so lightly, I implore—In a few hours we part—perhaps for ever—”

“You are in a sentimental mood this morning, monsieur, so we had better part

at once ; for I happen to be in a merry one."

" *Edith !*"

" Whom did you address ?"

" *Toi, toi, mon cœur, mon âme—Edith, Edith, que ce nom est doux !*"

Here Eugène advanced nearer to his companion, and attempted to take her hand which was resting on the keys of the piano, but shuddering, and with a look of disgust, she drew it from him, and rose hastily from her seat.

" Monsieur de la Tour, you have lost your senses—stand back, sir, and let me pass."

" True, true, I am mad—but you have made me so. No, you must not go—it is for the last time, and though your proud looks should kill me, I will speak. You have awakened passions in my nature that will never sleep again ; you tried insult and unkindness first, and when you thought I had been tortured long enough, then you smiled so softly, you spoke so gently, that

none with human feelings could have held back his heart. But it needed not this with me,—with me who worshipped you from the very first. Edith, though you are beautiful as an angel and fascinating as an enchantress, you are but a woman still ; and if you do not love me, you have played a most cruel, heartless game.”

(This had been said in French, but Edith replied in her own language.

“ *If* I do not love you !” (acting to perfection the part she had planned.) “ Really Monsieur Eugène, the supposition exalts your self esteem at too great an expense to your penetration and common sense ; but probably you are only putting my simplicity to the test. Love *you* indeed ! *C'est un peu trop fort.*”

Eugène's sallow face lost the small amount of colour it possessed, and his broad, low forehead, contracted into a mass of wrinkles.

“ Then why have you smiled upon me like an angel ? why have you spoken so

softly, sang to me, read with me, done all that a woman can do to make herself beloved? I will not believe, Edith, that you are a vain coquette, for have I not seen the admirable way in which you discouraged the boyish passion of Joseph Armstrong, depriving him of all presumptuous hopes, yet keeping his love and reverence still. Oh! if you had no feeling in return, why did you not behave thus to me? I should have understood you, even sooner than he has done—then, why, I ask, was he to be treated with a kindness that has been denied to me—why was I, the stranger in your country, to be made your victim, your sport?”

“Your accusations,” replied Edith, drawing up her little figure, till, in spite of its diminutive proportions, she looked quite queenly. “Your accusations, Monsieur Eugène, are too absurd to merit a reply, and the love of a Frenchman is the last thing in the world to excite compassion. It seems that my former ill-treatment and my latter kindness have both given you cause of complaint. The fact is, the first

was the genuine expression of the feeling with which you inspired me, but as it is in my disposition to be kind to somebody, and I saw that it would not do with my cousin, I generously turned to lavish the superabundant honey of my nature on you ; *knowing beforehand that there could be no danger in so doing.*"

"What do you mean ? who told you that Eugène de la Tour was strong enough to resist the fascinations of Edith Lascelles."

"It was no less a person than Monsieur de la Tour himself," said Edith, calmly, and she repeated, word for word, of the conversation she had overheard, enjoying the shame and confusion of her companion, in proportion to the mortification she had herself experienced. "And now," she added, in conclusion, "I have given *my* explanation, I have exonerated myself from your charge of coquetry, and here this useless discussion must end. I will not listen to another word from you, for, though I forgive you the insulting terms in which you spoke of me, I can feel nothing but weariness."

ness and impatience in your society. Monsieur de la Tour, I have the honour of wishing you good morning."

"One minute, only one, I intreat, I implore—"

But Edith passed him with a firm and stately step, guessing little of the evil passions her present victory had roused.

"*C'est à toi la première manche, ma princesse,*" he muttered, as the door closed on her, and the wrinkles cleared from his forehead, as he added, with an unpleasant smile, "*mais chacun à son tour.*"

Edith, who had found the task of smiling on the dwarfish Frenchman a much more disagreeable one than she had pictured it in her mental vision of retaliation, was really delighted that all was over, and that she could now wear her laurels (invisible though they were) without the penance of gazing, day after day, at the unshapely figure and uncomely face of her devoted admirer.

Whether his love was likely to produce only present disappointment and mortifica-

tion, or rankle into a wound that might overspread his whole nature, she never gave herself the trouble of considering. Accustomed to excite general admiration, and what, amongst the people with whom she had dwelt, frequently amounted to enthusiasm, Edith had never yet, to her knowledge, inspired an abiding attachment; and having an exceedingly comfortable faith in her own powers, she inclined to the belief, that foreigners were incapable of losing their hearts in earnest.

To be loved deeply and passionately, and by a really worthy and high-minded individual, was a wish she cherished tenderly, and till the accomplishment of which she guarded as a sacred treasure her own maiden affections, pleasing herself, in the meantime, with the idea, that when she *did* love, it would be something infinitely beyond the love of all other women—a passion made up of devotion, enthusiasm, and every auxiliary to romance that could be conceived by the most fertile imagination.

After all, she was but dreaming the sweet dream of youth, and what mattered it if her visions were a little more exaggerated than those of her fellow beings. Her slumber, at least, was more full of gladness than theirs—before her sealed eyelids passed more radiant forms; the fairies whispered in her ears softer, gentler tales; and though she must awake at last, she would still have dear memories of the dreaming time. And to all, however light their sleep has been, the first unclosing of the eyes is bitter.

Edith, having determined not to see Eugène again, was proceeding somewhat thoughtfully to her own room, when, in passing the breakfast parlour, a sound, resembling suppressed sobbing, fell upon her ear, and, without a moment's consideration, she opened the door quickly, and walked in.

The room was tenanted by two individuals, Mrs. Armstrong, and her son Joseph. They were sitting close together

at the top of the large square table, on which stood a tray, amply supplied with those delicacies, for which young people, in their teens, are supposed to have a passion. There was a very unbecoming redness about the eyes of the gentleman, which suggested the idea that the sobs owed their origin to him, and a plate of roly-poly-pudding, that the lady was evidently pressing upon his acceptance, made it appear, probable, that she had forgotten the flight of time, and was endeavouring, as in his very juvenile days, to heal his sorrows by the administration of sweets.

At the sudden apparition of Edith, they both started, and Joseph's cheeks became rather redder than his eyes.

"Oh, come in, my dear," said Mrs. Armstrong, with an evident attempt at a welcome, but her looks expressed very plainly, "you have done too much mischief already, and may leave us alone now."

Nevertheless, although Edith read these looks at a glance, she accepted the invitation, and seated herself by her younger cousin.

“You must cheer up, Joseph,” she said, kindly, “for remember you are leaving home for the last time, and at Christmas you are to come with your sisters to Fernley, and stay as long as your mother can spare you—indeed, it is quite true, for I asked papa, and he has given his consent—you know, Mrs. Armstrong, he is not fond of visitors in general, but you have all been so kind to me, and I am such a spoilt child, that there was no possibility of refusing me this request.”

“Ah, my dear, it is a long time to Christmas,” said the mother, with a prophetic sigh, “and Fernley is a long way from London; but where, I wonder, is your friend, Monsieur Eugène. The carriage will be round before he has had any luncheon.”

“Don’t bring him here just yet, mother,” said Joseph, imploringly—“he would quiz me for a month if he saw that—”

“Yes—yes, my darling, you are right—I will go and find him, and order a tray for him in the dining-room. Edith, I leave you in my place—see if you can persuade your cousin to eat something.”

“Oh, I can’t eat,” said the poor boy, when the door had closed on his anxious parent. “Is it not odd that my mother thinks tarts and puddings must make amends for everything—don’t *you* try to force them on me, Edith. I could not bear that.”

“I will do nothing that you dislike, Joseph,” replied his cousin; “but I cannot bear to see you look so dejected and miserable. I think if you were to try earnestly, you could summon a braver, firmer spirit.”

“Oh, you do not know all, Edith—you fancy I am fretting like a baby at leaving home—I am aware that—that I am very

backward in some things—and—and not so clever as *some* people ; but for all that I have got feelings, and—perhaps, I am not quite such—such a boy as you seem to imagine,”

Here he came to a full stop, and, leaning his arms on the table, buried his crimson face between them.

“ As I imagine, Joseph,” said Edith, with the utmost gentleness, “ my dear cousin you are entirely mistaken—It is because I do *not* deem you ‘ such a boy ’ that I advise your struggling with a despondency that a man should be ashamed of exhibiting—Come, cheer up, whatever may be the cause of your sorrow—*les beaux jours reviendront.*”

Thus exhorted, Joseph raised his head, and made a great effort to smile at his gentle monitress—but like many other great efforts it was met by signal failure, for the corners of his mouth obstinately persisted in turning down instead of up.

“ I can’t help it,” he faltered, despair-

ingly, "I know I'm a foolish fellow, and since you've been here I've never thought anything else—don't laugh at me, Edith, pray don't—I can't help it upon my honour."

"Joseph, you must think me a very heartless person if you suppose such a thing possible—Tell me what I can say or do to comfort you."

"Nothing!—how could you—you who are so good and clever, and beautiful—(he was now blushing again painfully)—but yet if you would do something, I—dear Edith, it would, I mean, make me a good deal happier."

"What is it?"

"Don't be angry with me then if you can't do it, but if you would just give me one little bit of your hair, no one should ever see it; and it would be such a great, great comfort to me—"

This was said exceedingly fast and nervously, but the pleading, boyish look that accompanied it, was too much for the

tender heart of Edith to resist. She walked quickly to Mrs. Armstrong's work-table, and taking up a pair of scissors unrolled the thick knot of hair that was gathered at the back of her small head, and cut off a long, shining mass which the love-sick Joseph seized upon and gazed at as rapturously as if all the fairies' gifts were contained therein.

“Keep it for your cousin's sake, Joseph,” Edith said, as she arranged her disordered tresses before the glass, “and mind if I ask you to produce it ten, twenty, or even thirty years hence, I shall expect you to do so—for you are the first person to whom I have ever given my hair; and it must be appreciated accordingly.”

She turned round in time to see the look of radiant happiness that was beaming on Joseph's face, and to hear footsteps approaching the room.

“Good bye now; your mother is coming, and she will want to have you to herself at the last—Put away the hair quickly, and

don't let your French friend see it—God bless you, Joseph,—we shall meet again at Christmas ”

As she held out her hand a sudden paleness came over the young man's face. He *had* feelings, as he said, and he was parting with his first love—he felt that his passion was, and must ever be, unrequited, but he had accustomed himself to this thought, and learned to derive pleasure from the simple presence of the object beloved. To lose this, even for a time, was an exceedingly hard trial, and for a moment he fancied that the pulses of his heart were standing still. But the warm touch of the little hand that was laid in his own, recalled him to himself, and pressing it with a sort of despairing fervour he muttered a few words that were perfectly unintelligible, and then suffered Edith to depart, with a quietness that was almost touching.

Whether Mrs. Armstrong succeeded after this in inducing her son to swallow

any of his favourite roly-poly, history has not recorded—but from what I know of human nature I should be inclined to give as an opinion, that the pudding and other delicacies returned untasted to the kitchen.

CHAPTER VII.

MAJOR LASCELLES.

THE next day Edith joined her father and sister, who had been staying at a hotel in London ; and another week saw them all established in their new home at Fernley.

“ You like it, Edith,” said Margaret, on the evening of their arrival, when the two girls, having made the tour of the house, were standing side by side on the broad terrace, overlooking one of the most charming prospects in England. “ I see by your face that you are nearly as much pleased with Fernley Manor as I was, and

you would have been quite, had you seen it when I did, at the very beginning of Autumn, instead of towards the end—but I am satisfied with your admiration, and papa will be enchanted.”

“Margaret,” replied Edith, passing her arm round her sister’s waist, “if all England resembled Fernley, and if all English people resembled my present companion, I should mourn no more for our bright Italian skies—I do indeed like this, and should rather live here for ever, with no society save that of my good and gentle sister, than in Harley Street with all the world around me.”

“I am so glad you are pleased, dear Edith, but you must not overrate the delights of a country life,” Margaret said anxiously. “I know that, to you, Fernley will often seem the very abode of loneliness and ennui—for however much we may admire nature, there will come moments when the heart aches for something more, and when we feel inclined to dare all things

for the sake of obtaining this dimly seen and mist enshrouded object of our craving. Solitude nurses the romance of the heart, Edith, and though it undoubtedly refines and purifies the mind, it very rarely strengthens it. You will be happy here in your own way, but the feelings that enable you to be so, are not the healthiest you could cherish. Had I chosen your destiny, it should have been in the midst of a bustling, matter-of-fact world, where you would have to act instead of to think, to do instead of to dream."

"Dear Margaret," said Edith, (who like most of her sex had no objection to hear even her weaknesses discussed with such affectionate interest,) "dear Margaret, you moralize so sweetly that I forget the words of the song in listening to the singer; but it strikes me that you must have passed a considerable portion of your own time in this dangerous trade of thinking, or how else have you gained all the rare wisdom I am quite sure you possess—"

“Experience, Edith, is a strangely clever teacher, and early sorrow is another. I have studied under both—but let us talk rather of the future than the past. We will have bright hopes, instead of sad memories for our banquet to-night.”

Half an hour after, the sisters left the terrace, and joined their father in the drawing-room.

I have hitherto given you but a very faint outline of Major Lascelles, but the time has now arrived for you to form a more intimate acquaintance with his character, and I must beg you therefore to accompany Margaret and Edith to his presence, and recommend you to pay particular attention to all he says, as he is a man of few words, and never speaks without mature deliberation. When his daughters entered the room he was sitting by a large fire (although the evening was decidedly sultry for the time of year,) reading some letters that he had found awaiting his arrival.

“Dear papa, it is a lovely place,” exclaimed Edith, dragging an easy chair as far as possible from the fire. “I am not the least disappointed.”

At the first sound of his youngest daughter's voice Major Lascelles raised his eyes from his newspaper, and kept them fixed on her face while she was speaking. This was his invariable custom, and as Edith presumed to think it a very unnecessary and foolish one, she rarely held long conversations with her father.

“I am particularly pleased to hear you say so, Edith,” he replied slowly, and still looking at her earnestly. “Margaret promises to do all in her power to atone to you for the absence of society ; and whatever you require in the way of books or music or drawing, remember my purse is entirely at your command. Amuse yourself in any manner you like, only be happy, and cheerful, and never let me see your cheek paler or your eye less bright than it

is at present. Margaret, let us have some tea now."

As the major spoke no more that evening, till it was time to wish his daughters good night, I shall take this opportunity of explaining a few of his peculiarities.

That he married a beautiful young wife, who left him in a mysterious manner about a twelvemonth after, you already know, but you have yet to learn the effect produced on him by this rather singular event ; an effect which was a secret to all in England, except his daughter Margaret, who was a girl of fourteen years old when her father's domestic calamity occurred.

Major Lascelles had been, in his younger days, a very proud and a very sensitive man, with a strong tincture of romance in his character, unsupported by the least moral firmness or self-reliance. His first marriage had been brought about by his family—the second was (on his side at least) purely a love match ; although perpetrated at the mature age of forty-five.

But the major's heart had not kept pace with his years, and Emily Brereton, a beautiful, high-spirited creature, became first the idol of his imagination, and then the cherished darling of his solitary home. A few months of dreamy happiness was all, however, that fate permitted him—for, too soon, he discovered that the bright star of his existence (as he had fondly deemed her) bore a much closer resemblance to a fiery comet—bringing in its brilliant train, desolation, warfare, and misfortune—in a word, the fair Emily had an evil spirit within, that neither allowed rest to its possessor, nor to any with whom she came in contact. The death of his youngest daughter opened the husband's eyes in the first instance to the fearful plague spot that was tainting his wife's nature. She began by murmuring loudly at the confinement entailed upon her during the season of necessary mourning ; and when the aggrieved father ventured gently to remonstrate against this cruel impatience, those passions,

so long suppressed, burst forth with terrible violence ; and the husband saw his idol stripped of its silver veil, which no romance or sophistry could ever after replace. From this time, all was discord and unhappiness till the birth of Edith—whose advent, by supplying the mother with a novel interest, brought a temporary lull to the storm-shaken house ; but the claims of society soon became paramount with the vain mother, to those of her infant daughter,—and intense love of admiration sent her forth into the world again, in search of that food which she would not live without. Major Lascelles, naturally of a jealous disposition, became nearly maddened by his wife's levity ; and when, after one of those fearful scenes of passion which were now of nearly daily occurrence, the beautiful Emily suddenly disappeared—he, like the rest of the world, hesitated not to put the worst construction on her flight. It was true that none of her male acquaintances were lost sight of at the same time, and

her greatest enemies could not accuse her of ever having distinguished one above the other—still she was gone—and who could believe, for one moment, that such a woman would go alone?

The first shock (which the husband had, to all appearance, borne manfully), being over, he sent for his eldest daughter from school, and made preparations for leaving England with the infant Edith and her nurse.

Margaret, who had a clear intellect, and a firm, though gentle, mind, became first her father's confidante, and finally, his support and guide—for, from the period when she joined him, and took upon herself the duties of a grown up daughter, he suffered his spirits and his energies to decline, so that, by the time they arrived at their chosen resting place, he was in a state but one degree removed from insanity. It is not my purpose to dwell here on the bitter sufferings of the lonely girl, thus placed in a situation of so much difficulty and respon-

sibility. It will suffice to tell that she braved them all—devoting herself to the care of her afflicted father and infant sister, with a heroism and judgment almost unexampled.

At length the constant change of scene and climate, assisted by time and ceaseless watchfulness, restored Major Lascelles to comparative mental health, and, as Edith grew towards girlhood, his dormant faculties seemed to expand and strengthen, that they might concentrate themselves upon this new claimant for his love and paternal care. In Edith he appeared to breathe a new life, for her he could once more plan and act ; towards her his hitherto scattered thoughts were always directed, and without that demonstrative tenderness which generally wins a corresponding amount of affection, it was plain to see that Major Lascelles loved his young and gifted daughter with more than ordinary devotion.

But either some remaining weakness of

intellect, or Edith's striking resemblance to her mother, caused him constantly to gaze at her with an undefined but painful dread of her suddenly leaving him as the other had done. Hence the strange habit he had contracted of fixing his eyes on her whenever she spoke, and the anxiety he manifested on all occasions that she should have every wish attended to, and be rendered happy at any sacrifice. That she had inherited her mother's love of admiration, he frequently suspected, and this was one of his chief reasons for returning to England, where he thought this dangerous passion would have less to nourish it than in the lands of poetry and romance. For my own part I believe that vanity will in all places find enough to exist and fatten upon, and that where food is scarce it will devour eagerly any coarse or inferior compound that comes in its way. But Major Lascelles was not much accustomed to analyze human nature, and like a prudent father he did what he imagined

was best. Margaret, who had a clearer head, and scarcely less deep affection for Edith, might have recommended different plans, had she been consulted—but she was *not* consulted, and therefore it only remained for her to hope all things, and to resolve on diligent watchfulness of her young and singularly attractive sister.

CHAPTER VIII.

FERNLEY.

THE first month at Fernley Manor passed away delightfully. The weather was charming, and Edith amused herself in wandering about the country, taking rough sketches of the scenery (which Margaret always had to finish,) and learning the gossip of the village, where she managed to become a favourite, by occasionally showing her pretty face for a moment at the cottage doors, and throwing trifling sums of money amongst the children who were playing in the streets. Any plan of

rational charity never entered her head, but there was a sort of gratification in being popular even with these poor people, and in so quiet a place what else was there to fill her thoughts.

I will not undertake to declare that Edith never dreamt of the possibility of meeting some romantic adventure in her promiscuous rambles, but however that might be, she certainly never did, Fernley boasting of no interesting curates, and sheltering in its quiet bosom no embryo Byrons, nor heroes of any kind whatever. The sisters attended regularly at the village church (where a very old man officiated), and they were, with the exception of two maiden ladies, and a bachelor brother, the only individuals not belonging to the working class, who met beneath that humble temple of their Maker.

All this, as I have hinted, did very well indeed for the first month, but after that a rainy season set in ; and Margaret's predictions were fulfilled.

"I shall die if this continues much longer ;" Edith said to her one day, tearing up impatiently the last sketch she had taken, and folding her hands with a look of despair. "I declare I should welcome the appearance of poor, silly Joseph Armstrong as a relief from this terrible monotony—something at least to laugh at."

Margaret forbore to remind her of what she had said the night of their arrival ; she only replied, quietly—

"Dear Edith, you have destroyed my favourite rustic bridge, and we cannot get another sketch of it before next summer."

"Oh, who cares for a rustic bridge with nobody ever crossing it?" exclaimed Edith, petulantly. "It is always a tantalizing object to me, that bridge of yours, Margey, and I really don't see what there is in it to admire so extravagantly."

"It is exquisitely picturesque, Edith, and I think I have heard you rave about it too."

"Just at first perhaps, but lately, since

the sun has ceased to shine there, it has always inspired me with the most gloomy feelings. There is something so fearful and dismal in the look of that dark dell beyond, that I could fancy it led to the caves of eternal despair—”

“Instead of to Sir Stuart Bernarde’s hunting lodge—Upon my word, Edith, your imaginings cannot be called lively ones. When the long days come again we must undertake a pilgrimage to this famous heather lodge, for the purpose of dispelling your treasonable fancies. They tell me it is not more than a mile and a half from the bridge, and that the whole way through the valley is perfectly enchanting.”

“By the bye, Margaret,” said Edith, suddenly, “I heard yesterday that those dear old ladies we see every Sunday at church with their equally ancient brother, are distant relatives of this Sir Stuart Bernarde—the house they live in belongs to him ; and their name is Cargill.”

“Indeed !” Margaret replied, without

any great appearance of interest. "You are becoming quite a news-monger, dear Edith."

"And no wonder," said the other, "I feel my mind contracting day by day—a little more, and there will only be one narrow window remaining, through which I shall see objects as the people around me see them ; and cease to remember perhaps that I ever possessed a more enlarged vision—Oh, Margey, I do wish the world we live in, were a few degrees less common place."

"The old mistake, Edith—we fritter away our time in trifles, we neglect opportunities of exalting our own feelings, and then we rail against life, and call the world common-place. Believe me, it is only so to those who take no pains to render it otherwise. The poor man toiling for his daily bread, the workwoman sitting hour after hour at her solitary needle, the tradesman surrounded with all the noise and bustle of

his calling, may have that within which makes your common-place world beautiful. Dear Edith, you confound the shadow with the substance. Refinement, sentiment, poetry, are to you the sparkling bubbles that rise on life's surface, but it is in the deep, even current which runs beneath, that you must look for the priceless gems, whose value no man can reckon."

"Well, well, Margaret, you know I always decline entering into argument with you, for I am really as firmly persuaded of your superior wisdom as I am of my own present distaste for all sublunary things. There can of course be no doubt that a species of refinement and romance may exist occasionally, amongst the sort of people we are accustomed to consider vulgar ; but then it must be altogether different from what *we* feel, and the one would not do after the other."

"You mean, I suppose, that were it your fate to be transformed into a poor, working

girl, you could not extract any poetry from such an existence ; you could not, in short, be happy, or raise yourself above the common-place people by whom you would be surrounded."

"I don't know. The case you have put seems to me less difficult, than one which suggests itself to my mind. For instance, I can imagine nothing more fearful than becoming the wife of an intensely matter-of-fact person, one who would be incapable of understanding a single feeling above the common standard. Picture my ideal, Margey—a stout, rosy-cheeked, good-tempered, large handed, broad-footed Englishman, fond of high-living, swearing by roast beef and port wine, wearing a very short waistcoat, and a very long coat, calling poetry of every denomination 'humbug,' looking at the finest scenery only in an agricultural point of view, hating all things and all people that are not purely British, and cherishing (as the only bit of

superstition in his nature) the fixed idea that Napoleon Bonaparte was the arch fiend himself, let loose for a given season."

Margaret smiled at this sketch, and asked Edith whether she had ever seen the original of it.

"Yes, Mr. Armstrong might have sat for it ; his son Joseph may sit for it twenty years hence ; half the men one sees in London would be recognized from it."

"And with such a person you believe it would be impossible for you to be happy ? Well, dear Edith, with your present feelings I am inclined to entertain a similar opinion ; but now try if you can describe the sort of man you should like above all others—the one who could satisfy every demand of your somewhat *exigeante* heart."

Edith mused a little while before she replied.

"Behold him then, Margaret ; in person he must be the reverse of my *brave Anglais*,

that is to say, with a figure rather tall and slight, a complexion pale rather than rosy, dark, of course,—I scarcely care to what degree which stops short of the mulatto—features noble and intellectual without being decidedly handsome. Then for his mind, he must have in the first place a highly cultivated one, none of your narrow English prejudices, none of your canting, bigotted, party views—all this I utterly despise. He must be highly imaginative, with a deep veneration for all that is really worthy of admiration and respect, and a lofty contempt for everything that breathes of littleness and vulgarity. He must love poetry and nature as I love it ; and finally, he must believe, as I believe, that the world does not contain so wise, so good, so dear a creature as my darling sister Margey.”

Edith had talked herself into the best of humours, and was now all affection and animation. Margaret returned with equal

warmth, the embrace that accompanied her concluding compliment, and then resumed the subject.

“But, my dear Edith, it appears singular to me that you have quite overlooked, in both your descriptions, real, genuine worth, principle, religion, benevolence, and such like qualities, which, believe me, would go much farther in ensuring your happiness as a wife, than all the fine intellect and imagination in the world. You will wonder, perhaps, when I tell you, that your first character, combined with simple worthiness, would interest me far more than your last.”

“But if the last possessed (as, of course, I meant him to do) not only simple worthiness, but the most exalted virtues—which then would you fall in love with, my Margey?”

“I don’t think I should fall in love with either, Edith ; but I would still adhere to my first choice, as your hero of the dark .

hair and exalted virtues, would have so many admirers, that he could well spare one to his simple and despised rival. By the bye, on what nation would you confer the honour of giving birth to this prodigy?"

"Oh, you are laughing at me," said Edith, in rather an offended tone; "but, I don't mind. My hero, as you choose to call him, must be a Briton, of course; whether English, Scotch, or Irish, I should not much care."

"What if Sir Stuart Bernarde realises your picture," said Margaret, willing, for once, to indulge her young sister's taste for this sort of idle gossiping.

Edith's cheek grew crimson.

"Oh, what nonsense, Margey—it is not likely I shall ever see him; besides, Scotchmen are generally fair; and rest assured, a yellow-haired laddie, however, bonnie, would never do for me—pooh, pooh, let us talk of something else."

This unlucky suggestion of Margaret's made Edith resolve to defer, till a future occasion, the communication of her fixed intention of "striking up an acquaintance," by hook or by crook, with the Misses Cargill and their brother.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEIGHBOURS.

It was not very long, however, before an opportunity for this disclosure presented itself, and Margaret, who saw, with pain and regret, the daily increasing langour and discontent of her sister, offered no opposition to what she considered a simple wish, on Edith's part, to vary, in some slight degree, the extreme monotony of her present life.

“But how do you intend to accomplish an introduction, my dear? for, you know, if they had been desirous of making our acquaintance, they would have called when we first came here. You have really no excuse for paying a formal visit.”

“Besides, that would be so terribly commonplace, Margaret. Oh, I shall think of the ways and means, depend upon it; nor need you fear that I shall do anything to disgrace either papa or yourself. Believe me, I am as much interested in the dignity of Fernley Manor as the rest of you.”

“I do not doubt it, Edith—only I should be sorry that you intruded upon these good old ladies, if they have a particular fancy for not knowing their neighbours.”

“Margaret, you may trust to my judgment and discretion. They always smile so kindly at me when I pass their pew at church—the dear old things! that I am

sure they will rather welcome my advances than otherwise."

"Very well, dear, then do what you like about it. They may, perchance, keep your mind from actual starvation till the arrival of the Armstrongs at Christmas."

The day following this discussion, the sun made its appearance, for a few minutes, and Edith, hastily equipping herself, set forth, with heightened spirits, in the direction of the village, fully resolved not to return till she had advanced, at least, one step towards the intimacy she had taken such a sudden fancy to form.

The cottage, inhabited by the old ladies, was situated at the further extremity of Fernley. A pretty place it was in summer, with its low, thatched roof, its green portico, and its three tall cedar trees, standing, side by side, on the mimic lawn—but now its outward aspect was dreary and saddening enough ; and Edith, having ar-

rived at the neat iron railings, stood still, for a few minutes, wondering how the old people, with no society but their own, managed to get through the long winter days, which were so inexpressibly tedious to her.

While she remained there, hesitating in what way to make the first step, (for, with all her ingenuity, she had not yet hit upon any plan that seemed to her sufficiently out of the common,) the house door suddenly opened, and Mr. Cargill, (the perfect picture of a precise old bachelor,) came slowly across the narrow lawn.

Edith, when she walked out alone, was nearly always accompanied by a large Newfoundland dog, to which she was much attached, and who followed and obeyed his young mistress with a zeal and quickness of perception rarely seen even amongst this sagacious and noble breed of animals. She had brought him, on the present occasion, not without a hope that

he might be found a useful agent in her plans ; and seeing poor Mr. Cargill come out alone, an idea suggested itself to her mind, which, without consideration, she immediately acted upon.

“ Nero, Nero, at him, Nero, stop him ; but gently, gently, Nero.”

And the dog, with a loud bark, sprang at the astonished gentleman, just as he was passing out of his own gate, and held him tightly by the skirts of his long, old-fashioned coat.

“ Oh, oh !” screamed the unfortunate bachelor, endeavouring vainly to shake off the huge animal, and turning as pale as death. “ Oh, dear, he will bite me—he is mad. Madam, madam,” in a louder voice to Edith, who had, of course, walked on, pretending ignorance of the scene, “ could you, would you call of this ferocious dog ?”

Edith, thus appealed to, walked back hastily to the spot ; and feigning great

concern, (she was an accomplished little hypocrite, you see,) spoke in an authoritative tone to Nero, who immediately released his prisoner, and returned quietly to the side of his mistress.

By this time, the screams of their brother had brought out the two sisters in a state of the most nervous agitation, and Edith took upon herself to explain the occurrence, apologising, in the most charming and graceful manner, for the alarm Mr. Cargill had sustained, and blaming her own stupidity in not stopping the moment Nero began to bark.

“Oh, don’t say another word, my dear young lady,” exclaimed Miss Cargill. “No one could blame you for an instant. Poor, dear Simeon has such a particular horror of dogs, that he scarcely ever enjoys a walk on this account. When he was a little boy—but, dear me! it is beginning to rain, and we are keeping you standing in the cold. Do favour us, Miss Lascelles,

by stepping in till the shower is over. And, Simeon dear, you must not think of going to the post till you have taken a taste of brandy ; I never saw you look so white before. Come, we will all go in ; and your favourite, Miss Lascelles, can lie on the large mat under the portico."

I am afraid to say how little Edith's conscience reproached her for all the unnecessary alarm and confusion she had been the means of creating ; but the truth is, she was too well satisfied with the result of her mischievous experiment, to think much of anything else, though she did, on entering the house, entreat Mr. Cargill in the most earnest manner, not to decline his sister's offer of a glass of brandy.

"You are too good, madam—too considerate," said the poor old gentleman, still trembling from the cruel fright. "I must have appeared to you in the light of a very despicable coward ; but my sisters will explain to you the origin of my excessive

nervousness on the subject of dogs. Permit me now to retire, as I am not fit company for anybody.”

Edith’s pretty face expressed the exact amount of concern called for by the occasion ; and, as the door closed on Mr. Cargill, she turned to his sisters and said, in her very sweetest voice,

“ My dear ladies, I feel assured that I must evermore be an object of detestation to you all—and I have been *so* anxious to become friendly with you.”

Of course, this first assertion was vehemently protested against ; and then followed the story of the dog—a touching reminiscence of Simeon Cargill’s younger days—which I do not think sufficiently interesting or important, to lay before my readers. It will content you to know that Edith listened very attentively—and, at its conclusion, expressed her firm conviction that it was quite enough to make the greatest hero that ever lived, exist in bodily fear of the whole canine species.

By this time, the second Miss Cargill had placed on the table wine and biscuits,—of which the young guest was pressingly urged to partake ; and Edith, long before the shower was over, found herself rapidly advancing in the good graces of the kind and simple-minded old ladies.

“And now,” she said, rising at last, as a gleam of sunshine stole into the little parlour, “I must really wish you good morning—and tell you again how much I feel your kindness. I shall call in a day or two, if you will allow me, to enquire after your brother, and bring you some sketches of Italian scenery. It will be such a treat to me to come and chat with you now and then.”

When Edith really wished and tried to please, there was something irresistible in her manner—a sweetness, a gracefulness, a winning art, that acted like a charm on all who came within its influence. It was not often that she chose to exert this fasci-

nating power ; but when she did, the effect was invariably the same ; and none, from a little child to the coldest and most worldly person, was ever known to resist it.

I have seen this sort of mental magic practised by two or three besides Edith Lascelles ; and I could, if I chose, (having analysed it closely) let you partly into the secret—but, as I disapprove of every sort of magic, it would be quite against my principles to teach it ; and I would rather recommend you to study the Christian graces of Love and Charity, which will be sure to win you affection and admiration at last, though, not always, perchance, so quickly, as Edith won the tender hearts of the two old ladies at Fernley cottage—for their parting words were,

“ Then, you really promise to come and take your tea with us the day after to-morrow ? It will be quite a *fête* for us in our quiet way—and my dear young lady

never fancy that Simeon will regret his little fright again, since it has been the means of introducing us to such a very charming neighbour."

CHAPTER XII.

AN EVENING AT FERNLEY COTTAGE.

MAJOR LASCELLES looked rather grave when Edith told him about her new acquaintances, and the invitation she had received from them. He thought it a strange proceeding altogether—particularly as he had given out that he intended to check any approach to intimacy on the part of his country neighbours.

“They must be vulgar-minded, presum-

ing people—and quite unfit to associate with his daughter.”

“Indeed, papa, they are charming ;” said Edith, pleadingly ; “and I think their inviting me in such a friendly way, without a previous interchange of visits (which is generally deemed indispensable with our stiff-necked country people), is a proof of kindness, rather than presumption -- besides, papa, I have set my heart on going to see them—you know I have not many amusements here ; one can’t read or sing, or draw, all day long. And the Cargills never go out themselves—so they won’t annoy you in any way.”

She had very little trouble about the matter ; her father, lacking moral courage to refuse the least request on which Edith said she had set her heart ; but the present fancy, as far as it could be seen through, was certainly extremely innocent ; and no one could reasonably blame the Major, if mischief came of it hereafter.

Margaret thought the whole affair too unimportant to meddle with, and rather rejoiced than otherwise, at the new prospect of interest the acquaintance might open to her sister.

So on the appointed evening, Edith, accompanied by an old, grey-headed servant as an escort, set forth for Fernley Cottage, in one of her sunniest moods, and with the intention of making herself as amiable as she possibly could.

The old ladies having named an early hour for taking tea, it was not quite dark when their young guest arrived, and as Edith walked up to the door, she saw, through the parlour window, the whole party assembled round a blazing fire, eagerly devouring the contents of a letter, which the brother appeared to be reading aloud. It was quite a picture—the eager looks of the two spinsters, as they bent forward in their chairs with half-open mouths, and evidently delighted faces—the gentleman's erect figure, and

complacently nodding head—and finally, the large tabby cat, just roused from its slumbers on the hearth-rug, staring from one to the other of its usually quiet owners, as if asking the meaning of this very unusual excitement.

Edith was, at least, as much surprised, and mystified as the cat, for she had somehow come to the conclusion, that these worthy people were far beyond the age of ordinary hopes and fears, and believed, I fancy, almost, that no event could happen to them of more interest or importance than her own first visit. She was a little annoyed, for the moment, at the idea of their minds being pre-occupied, and thus less free to receive the lively impression she had fully prepared herself to create—but the kind, smiling faces that greeted her entrance, banished all such unworthy thoughts, and she sat down amongst her new friends, ready and anxious to sympathise with the glad tidings they were evidently dying to communicate.

Edith, however, had many enquiries to make, respecting Nero's victim, and the old gentleman, unused to the expression of so much interest from young and rosy lips, would have waited, with a great deal of laudable patience, for a convenient opportunity of alluding to the exciting letter, had his sisters been equally disinterested. But this was not to be expected, considering what a rare thing news of any kind had become to the quiet dwellers of the cottage; so Eliza, the youngest, and most talkative, having assisted Edith in removing her numerous wraps, went into the subject at once.

"My dear Miss Lascelles, you must not be surprised or shocked, if we seem a little strange to-night."

"A little elated," amended the elder sister.

"Yes, a little elated," resumed Eliza, nodding pleasantly at Miss Cargill for this correction, "for we have had some very joyful news—news that was altogether so

unexpected too. Oh, Miss Lascelles, my dear, if you only knew Nettia, you would feel, I am certain, as we do."

"Who is Nettia?" said Edith, quite prepared now to be interested in the spinster's story.

"Why, we always call her our niece, because we love her like a near relation; but she is only connected with our family by marriage."

"Not her own marriage, my dear," put in Miss Cargill again; "that's yet to come."

"Oh, yes," continued Eliza, looking very much obliged for this assistance, as on the former occasion, "that's yet to come, as Hannah says—not her own marriage, of course, but her mother's, who was a widow with one daughter, when she accepted the hand and heart of our first cousin, the Reverend Alexander Boisragon, with an income of about three hundred a-year, and a small living in Devonshire. Well, this child grew up into a very lovely young woman,

and good as she was handsome ; but the husband died, leaving a son to be educated and provided for, and the poor mother has had hard work to make two ends meet during these last fifteen years, for Alick was sent to a public school, and then to a private tutor's, and after that to Cambridge, and all out of not more than five hundred per annum—her husband's private fortune, and her own."

"But Mrs. Boisragon is an extraordinary woman," said Mr. Cargill, with something very like a sigh. "I never saw her equal."

"She is an admirable creature, indeed," pursued the narrator, "but Nettia is more to my taste. Miss Lascelles, if you are not tired, I will finish her history."

"Pray do," said Edith, thinking it might have been told fifty times over in the same space, "I am deeply interested."

"Well, my dear, you may suppose that with such a heavy drain upon Mrs. Boisragon's income, there was little left for the

education of her daughter. I do not believe poor Nettia ever had a master in her life, and I am sure she deserved the best ; for a more intelligent, industrious creature it would be quite impossible to find. So with a little assistance from her mother, and constant diligence, this dear girl managed, after she was thirteen, to educate herself ; and though she can neither play, nor draw, nor dance fashionably, I *will* say that I should be proud to have a daughter of my own as well instructed in every branch of useful knowledge, as Antoinette Egerton. She doats upon her half-brother and has never been known to breathe a single murmur at the superior advantages he has enjoyed. The fact is, Mrs. Boisragon reckoned perhaps a little too much on Nettia's beauty, which she thought would be certain to ensure her a good match ; but you know, Miss Lascelles, beauty without money goes for a mere nothing in these days ; and a quiet, Devonshire village, was not exactly the place for matrimonial

speculations. So, to the surprise of all who knew her worth, and saw her remarkable attractions, our darling girl arrived at the age of twenty-four, without having had a single proposal. She often laughed about it herself, and used to say that she should never fall in love ; but we always told her she knew nothing of her own heart, and that it would be caught for good one of these days. And now, my dear, I am coming to the pith of my narrative. The last we heard of our friends, until the letter just received, was that Alick had left Cambridge (which was too expensive for his mother's scanty purse) and had gone to pass some months with his cousin, Sir Stuart Bernarde, in the highlands. This Sir Stuart, whom you must have heard of in the neighbourhood, my dear, is our relation also, and a more charming, accomplished man never came out of our bonnie Scotland. He is about thirty-two years of age, and like Nettia, has frequently boasted that he should go

down to the grave without having contracted a single attachment stronger than friendship ; but fate has willed it otherwise, for the letter you found us reading, announces the joyful fact that Sir Stuart, having brought back Alick, has fallen desperately in love with our dear, darling Nettia, that they are engaged, and will most likely be married in the Spring.

“ Poor Mrs. Boisragon is nearly beside herself with delight—for, in addition to Sir Stuart’s virtues and attractions he has a noble fortune to bestow on his wife, and our child will be one of the first ladies in Scotland.”

Miss Eliza was obliged to pause here, not only because she was quite out of breath, but because her eyes were full of happy tears, and her voice was quivering perceptibly. Edith’s glowing cheeks attested her sympathy, without the aid of words ; at any rate, she did not speak, and they were all perfectly satisfied with her silence.

The arrival of the tea equipage prevented, for awhile, any renewal of the all engrossing subject; but before the meal was concluded, Miss Lascelles had learned that Nettia was to be invited immediately to Fernley Cottage, and that Sir Stuart Bernarde would come, soon after Christmas, and spend a month or two at Heather Lodge.

The remainder of the evening these kind and well-bred old ladies devoted entirely to their young guest, who, though pleased with their attentions, did not exert herself to charm them quite so much as she had intended. Perhaps she was too deeply interested in Miss Egerton's history, to think about herself—perhaps she had a head-ache, and felt incapable of conversation—or it might be that she despaired of gaining any prominent place in hearts that were already filled with another image.

Reader, if you do not think that either of the above reasons would have influenced our friend Edith, I must leave you to

suggest a more probable one, for I have shewn you quite enough of her heart to enable you to judge of its most secret workings.

Little as the young lady did, however, she confirmed the favourable impression made on the inmates of the cottage the first day of their acquaintance, and they all joined in entreating her to come very often when their darling Nettia should be with them. Edith feared the arrival of her own guests would suspend, for awhile, the intimacy, in which she promised herself so much pleasure, but she would certainly call upon Miss Egerton, and hoped to prevail on her to come sometimes to the Manor. The old people were delighted at this, and prophesied that their Nettia and Miss Lascelles would become the greatest friends.

Thus everything seemed to wear a smiling, sunny aspect, and while Edith walked home in a deeply thoughtful mood, attended by Nero, Peter, and his lantern,

the happy Cargills were building a thousand castles in the air, and dreaming away as foolishly as though more than half a century had not passed over each of their heads, teaching them, in its progress, the utter vanity of all human scheming.

Let them dream on peacefully, dear, kind old souls! They are standing on the rock themselves, and it is only through those they love, that earthly sorrow can reach them now. They will kneel together, and pray fervently for the happiness of the beloved ones, and then they will sleep with that perfect calmness, which the young and feverish hearted seldom enjoy.

Let them dream on!

CHAPTER XI.

THE WIDOW AND HER DAUGHTER.

AND now I am going to introduce you, in due form, to Mrs. Boisragon and her daughter, for eloquent as Miss Eliza Cargill has been in their behalf, I do not think you feel, at present, as much interested about them, as I intend you shall be by-and-bye.

It is a few days after Sir Stuart Bernarde's proposal, and that gentleman, having been suddenly called to London,

hastaken Alick with him, and the two ladies are quite alone, sitting with their needle-work by a small, clear fire, in the prettiest little parlour you can possibly imagine. They both look very happy, and the mother smiles, at intervals, in a quiet, pleasant manner to herself. At length, she says,

“I am thinking, dear, what a state my letter will put our good cousins in. Can’t you fancy the trio as they read the news?”

“They will be enchanted,” the daughter answers, with a sweet, flitting blush. “I know they have long had secret wishes on the subject, for Stuart’s praises have been sung to me ever since I can remember.”

“Then you were prepared to admire him, Nettia?”

“No, mama, I cannot say that, for my opinion has always been, that my dear aunts love everybody, and everything; and I fancied that their anxiety to see me well married, might make them exaggerate Sir Stuart’s manifold attractions. I cer-

tainly had not fallen in love with him before we met."

"But you have no doubt of your feelings now, dearest?"

"Mama!"

"Forgive me, Nettia, I did not mean for one instant to question your sincerity, or to imply a suspicion that you had accepted Sir Stuart for any worldly considerations. I am only tremblingly anxious for your happiness, my own precious child—ah, you have been so good to me Nettia—and I have asked myself once or twice whether yours is a disposition to devote itself entirely to an object with whom you have no early associations; and whether you may not, as so many hundreds have done, mistake gratified vanity for a deep and enduring attachment. You know, my love, it is the first time you have received really serious attentions."

Nettia had ceased to work now, and was sitting with her calm, earnest eyes fixed on her mother's face.

“Mama, what shall I say to relieve your apprehensions on this subject? My own mind is clear, settled, unchangeable. I will tell you the sort of feeling I have for Stuart Bernarde, and you shall judge whether it is love or gratified vanity. I admire him, in the first place, for that strength of mind and loftiness of thought which I have found in none before. I approve his principles, his contempt for mere appearances, his recognition of religion as the only safe pilot through the troubled waters of life. I am grateful for his generous attachment to myself; his tenderness touches my heart—Mama, I feel that I could suffer cheerfully for him, and with him; I could pity and conceal his faults, I could—I *do* glory in his virtues; and I think the prospect of becoming his wife as bright and fair a one as ever dawned upon a human being. I am very, very, happy.”

Mrs. Boisragon looked at the animated

speaker through a mist of joyful tears ; she took the outstretched hands and drew her daughter to her bosom.

“ My own girl, there is none like you—God grant that your husband may be worthy of the treasure he will obtain. I am more than satisfied, Nettia ; and Heaven keep that pure, true heart, from woman’s trials.”

“ Pray rather, dearest mother, that I may have strength to meet them when they come for how can I expect to escape the common lot ?”

“ You are right, my love, always right, but a mother shrinks from the thoughts of her childrens’ sufferings—I could not bear to see that dear cheek grow wan, or that bright eye become dim with tears. I am counted gentle by nature, Nettia, but I believe I should not hold from cursing any who brought sorrow to you or Alick.”

“ Dear Alick,” said the sister, with such a glow of warm affection lighting up her

face "he is less calculated, I fear to encounter affliction than I am, mama. It seems to me that I have an endless fund of endurance ready for the hour of need ; but poor Alick looks so little into the realities of life ; he would be so astonished at the presence of actual suffering, that I should fear his giving way to it without a struggle."

The mother sighed as she said "you think I have spoiled your brother, Nettia ?"

"Not spoiled him, mama—I do not believe even you could accomplish that ; but perhaps a little less indulgence would have been better for Alick, when he was younger."

"Ah yes—you have had no over indulgence, my Nettia, and you are all that the fondest mother could desire."

"So is Alick, dear mama, surely ; where would you find a nobler, warmer hearted, dearer creature ?"

"Yes, he is indeed, all this ; but, like

you, Nettia, I should tremble for his strength of mind were real trouble to assail him. God grant that the paths of his life may be smooth ones. You think, my dearest, that Stuart has a strong mind."

"I do, for I have never detected a single symptom of weakness; but our acquaintance has not been of very long standing, and I have had no opportunity of seeing his fortitude tested. I hope sincerely my judgment may be a correct one."

"Our cousins at Fernley have the highest possible opinion of him; and they have known him from his childhood."

"Mama, I have not the shadow of a fear respecting Stuart Bernarde—I think much more of my own unworthiness. There is something so generous, so disinterested, so noble minded in his devotion to an obscure, penniless girl like myself, when he might have chosen amongst the highest and richest in the land."

The mother smiled fondly on her beautiful, modest child, and (with a little shake of the head, as if not quite coinciding with Nettia's depreciation of herself) resumed her work, and suffered her thoughts to wander into the realms of that smiling future which now seemed opening before them. She too, the widow of a twice told tale, was dreaming away as pleasantly as though life was in its bud, and experience a stranger whose acquaintance she had yet to make.

And Nettia, the young, the newly betrothed, the fresh in heart and mind ! had she no dreams to while away the hours of that long winter's day ? Who is there that remembers not the unutterable sweetness of these pure and early dreams ? who will not envy the bright and sunny visions that peopled the quiet room, as she plied her work diligently, and breathed spontaneous thanks to Heaven for the new and delicious happiness of which she was conscious.

Well, let them all dream on ; for has not the wise man told us that there is a time to laugh, as well as a time to weep. And whether it be far or near, what wisdom can there be in anticipating the weeping time ?

CHAPTER XII.

CHRISTMAS GUESTS.

It was after nearly three weeks of the coldest and gloomiest weather, that the Armstrongs made their appearance at Fernley Manor. Edith had been kept in doors during these very tedious weeks, by a succession of snow storms, and the bitterest of easterly winds ; and her temper, or, as she would have said, her spirits had suffered materially from this long imprisonment. There are few, I believe, who can

continue to smile serenely under an obstinate easterly wind, for independently of the effect it usually produces on the nervous system, it is a great destroyer of beauty, and causes the loveliest face to look pinched and blue. Now Edith, like many others whom I have known, could not bear to have an unattractive image reflected in her glass at any time, whether it was likely to be gazed at or not ; and from being unaccustomed to our English climate, the sharp, wintry atmosphere had certainly done her much mischief for the time, and produced that clouded state of temper which gave as much pain to her quiet, patient sister, as to herself. The arrival of the Armstrongs was therefore hailed by both of them as a most welcome relief, and Edith became half reconciled to her own diminished beauty, when she observed that Louisa and Martha had shockingly red noses, and that Joseph's cheeks were verging on a decided purple.

The stately Major received his daughter's

guests with cold but studied politeness; made a short speech as he met them in the hall; gave an arm to the two ladies to lead them into the drawing-room; and then considered himself absolved from all further trouble on their account. He had no fancy for women's society—if they were clever he could not compete with them, and if silly or vulgar, they shocked that sort of romantic taste which still clung to him, in spite of advancing years and the rude shocks he had encountered.

A very short time served to convince Edith that Joseph's passion had not withered in the "treacherous air of absence," and she was pleased with the discovery. In the present dearth of livelier excitement, there was some satisfaction in witnessing the devotion of even this boyish heart; and truth obliges me to confess that she had not now the prudence and good feeling to discourage him so decidedly as during her stay in London. She trusted, perhaps, that his age would preserve him from

entertaining false hopes, or that her former conduct had established an understanding between them—or it may be that she never gave the matter one serious thought, and only acted upon the impulse of an inconsiderate vanity, which everybody knows is selfishness in its most subtle guise. Be this as it may, she certainly smiled with a cruel sweetness upon her desperately enamoured cousin ; and his sisters, never doubting Joseph's powers of captivation, encouraged him in the rapturous idea just dawning upon his mind, that Edith was no longer indifferent to his ardent worship.

Margaret, though the most unsuspecting creature living, in affairs of the heart, was roused at length, to a surprised observation of the flirtation going on ; and finding Edith alone one morning, she spoke to her seriously on the subject.

“ My dear girl, you really must be more guarded in your conduct towards Joseph Armstrong—unless it is your intention to marry him, by-and-bye.”

“Margaret—what an idea !”

“Nay, Edith, it is an idea that would suggest itself to any one who saw you together—unless it might be a very uncharitable person—who would, perhaps, say you were only trifling with the poor boy.”

“What nonsense ! there can, surely, be no impropriety in my speaking kindly to such a mere child as Joseph—my cousin, too, and my guest.”

“Assuredly not ; but you know, Edith dear, you are not content with speaking kindly to him ; you are very accomplished in the art of fascinating ; and you have exercised this art most industriously of late. Besides, the young man is, at least, as old as yourself, if not older ; and just at the age when the strongest impressions are often made. Pray, my love, think seriously of what you are about.”

Edith, like all spoiled children, was very impatient of reproof—especially, when her

conscience told her it was merited ; so this kindly meant warning of her sister, caused great offence to the young lady, and she determined on shewing a few airs in consequence.

“I am going out, Margaret,” she said, coldly, about an hour after the above conversation had taken place ; “and as I shall probably be absent till dinner time, perhaps you will be good enough to make my excuses to Mr. Armstrong, when he comes in. I had promised to give him a lesson in singing this morning.”

Margaret was busy in her store-closet—she looked up with a pained expression, as her sister spoke.

“Very well, Edith—do you wish me to name any reason for the non-fulfilment of your engagement ?”

“Oh ! you can do as you please. I am going to call on Miss Egerton ; she has been more than a week at the cottage ; and I promised to pay an early visit.”

(I should have mentioned that the Misses Cargill and Margaret had already exchanged calls, and that the Major had even condescended so far as to leave a card for the old gentleman, in return for a visit he had received from him.)

And now behold Edith, dressed with a considerable degree of taste and care, (in spite of her angry mood,) walking quickly towards the village, accompanied by the faithful Nero, to whom she was unusually harsh and snappish on this occasion, which you will say, was a piece of unpardonable injustice, inasmuch, as the poor animal had neither instigated Margaret to lecture the little flirt, nor could in any way be supposed to have had a hand in the matter that annoyed her.

But, as in most of the clouds that overshadow us in this world, there is generally some faint speck of blue, to give courage to our sinking hearts, so, in the present case, there was one circumstance which

compensated to Edith for much of the annoyance she had suffered—the day was mild and fine, for the south wind blew, and she felt that she was looking her very best.

This may appear a trifling thing to those of my readers who are blessed with strong minds ; but, I dare say, there are others who will readily understand it, when they remember that Miss Lascelles was going to meet the much vaunted “Nettia” for the first time ; to endure a comparison with the almost perfect Miss Egerton, of whom she already felt, (whether with or without reason, I leave you to judge,) an instinctive and most irritating jealousy.

The very neat and respectful housemaid, who always looked as if she had just stepped out of a bandbox, answered Edith’s knock, and told her the ladies were all at home.

This was fortunate, at least ; she would

have grumbled terribly had it been otherwise ; for her curiosity was really very great concerning the bride elect of the hitherto invincible Sir Stuart.

As usual, the two good old maids sprang up, and advanced, with open arms, to greet their new favourite.

“How kind of you to come ; how we have wished to see you ; what *has* kept you away so long ?”

Edith smiled her very sweetest on the kind questioners, and then turned to where Miss Egerton was sitting.

“Ah, we shall have the pleasure of making you two acquainted at last,” said the elder spinster. “My dear Nettia, this is our young neighbour, Miss Lascelles ; Miss Lascelles, Miss Egerton. And so now you know each other, and, I am sure, will very soon become the best of friends.”

They shook hands, they both smiled, and murmured a few words, indicative of the

pleasure they felt in becoming acquainted; Miss Egerton placed a chair for Edith, quite close to her own, they entered easily and naturally into familiar conversation, (for neither of them possessed any of that bashfulness with which some young ladies are afflicted,) and the old people looked delightedly on, thinking to themselves that, in point of beauty, and goodness, and even cleverness, there would be rarely found such a striking match as the one before them.

Such was their opinion of the two; but now you shall hear the young people's opinion of each other. Miss Egerton, being the eldest, has the privilege of speaking first; and her observations, be it understood, are in reply to Eliza Cargill's anxious enquiries on the subject.

“Miss Lascelles, though not beautiful, has a face that you feel compelled to gaze at; and there is a strange and powerful fascination about her, such as I have never

seen in any human being before. I cannot get her out of my thoughts ; she must have bewitched me, I believe : and yet, in spite of all this, I do not fancy that I could make a very great friend of her. It is perhaps, that she is too clever for me, too imaginative ; Alick would understand her better."

Now for Edith's sentiments regarding Nettia, which she confides to Martha Armstrong, because her sister is still in disgrace.

"Miss Egerton is certainly wondrously beautiful both in form and face, a splendid Juno of a woman, with eyes that speak of every virtue in the calendar, and a mouth that seems made to express nothing but the gentlest and most amiable things. But, but—you know, Martha, we are none of us without this unfortunate 'but,' to our characters—but, if I were a man, I should as soon think of falling in love with the statue of Minerva, or that noble creature

who represents Britannia on the lesser coins of this realm, and elsewhere. There is something so grand, and cold, and still, about Miss Egerton."

CHAPTER XIII.

A PRESENTIMENT.

“NETTIA, my love, what ails you? I never saw you with such a melancholy expression of countenance before;” said Miss Cargill to her niece, on the evening of the day Miss Lascelles had called—“yet you have received your accustomed letters, and you say that they contain no bad news.”

Miss Egerton was sitting, when thus addressed, on a low stool by the fire, into which, very contrary to her usual habit, she was gazing fixedly, and with evidently

wandering, if not uneasy thoughts ; for though the cat (a particular favourite of hers) was mewing plaintively, and looking up to her for notice, she never bestowed on it so much as a single glance, but continued silent, grave, and pre-occupied.

Her aunt's question roused her, however, immediately, and getting up at once she drew a chair to the table, and resumed, with greater industry than before, the work she had laid aside.

"I am ashamed of myself, aunt, for indulging in such an indolent mood ; it is not usual with me, and still less so are the feelings that have led to it—do you know what it is to feel a presentiment of evil ?"

"Oh, my dear, I hope you are not getting fanciful ;" said Miss Cargill, anxiously, "that would be such a pity, Nettia. In Scotland, you know, presentiments, and even second sight, are believed in, but in this country all superstition is called weakness ; and you, as an English lassie, ought to struggle against it."

“ But, my dear aunt,” replied Nettia, “ I have never in my life till now felt anything of the sort. It has come upon me suddenly and unaccountably. It is painful from its newness ; but I am not going to yield to it, you may be sure ; there will be a hard battle if this mysterious foe continues to advance—weakness in my old age, indeed ! that would never do.”

Nettia tried to speak gaily and lightly—she was such a good, courageous girl ; but the aunt’s curiosity, as well as some lingering remnants of national superstition, had been awakened—these two were spending the evening alone ; and she returned to the subject.

“ It is a bad plan, Nettia, to brood over these gloomy thoughts to ourselves. Tell me what form your forebodings take, my dear.”

It was evident that the niece wished to talk no more about it ; she imagined that the best way to drive away the tormentor would be to pay it no attention whatever,

certainly not to discuss it as a serious thing—but Miss Cargill's question could not easily be evaded, so she answered, with her eyes bent stedfastly on her work, and her cheeks glowing with really modest blushes—

“It was all vagueness in my mind at first, a sudden darkening of what had been so very bright and hopeful before ; but by degrees it grew more distinct, and became at last connected with Stuart, belonging solely to him. Perhaps this is natural, aunt, as he has been so much in my thoughts of late, but it will be difficult to reconcile myself to it, for all that.”

“Since when has the fit come upon you, Nettia ?”

“Since this morning, only—I suppose the gude wives of Scotland would say some one had cast an evil eye upon me, but, except Miss Lascelles, I have seen no stranger to-day ; and, fascinating as she is, I don't suppose she possesses the powers of witchcraft.”

“Or that she would exercise them maliciously upon you, if she did, Nettia,” said the good aunt, looking fondly at the beautiful girl by her side. “No, my dear, depend on it Edith Lascelles has nothing to do with your bewitchment; you begin to pine for your lover, darling—that’s all.”

“No, no, I am not so weak as that, I hope,” Miss Egerton answered, quickly; “I am too happy with you to pine for any one—still, I shall welcome Stuart gladly when he comes, especially after these foolish fears—And now, aunt, let us talk about something else.”

* * * * *

In a few days, Miss Egerton, escorted by Mr. Simeon Cargill, returned Edith’s visit, and from this time the young ladies became very friendly, and saw a great

deal of each other, the Major permitting his daughter to invite the cottage party as often as she pleased ; and the kind-hearted old maids opening their house at all times to Edith and her friends.

Louisa and Martha Armstrong had grown very weary of their stay at the Manor, and, but for Joseph's pressing entreaties, would have taken their flight after the first fortnight. There was nothing here to interest them in the slightest degree, no hope of the most insignificant flirtation even ; and though the frequent invitations of the Cargills formed some little variety, they soon discovered that old people were terrible bores, and the calm, stately Nettie the most unamusing person in the world. She would not even talk to them about her lover, or describe her *trousseau*, or do any of the things they were quite certain they should do, in a similar situation. So their discontent having at last reached its climax, the two young ladies were on the point of writing home for their recall, when a letter

Joseph received somewhat changed their plans, and gave them a decent stock of patience to endure the dull routine of their present life.

This letter was from our old acquaintance Monsieur Eugène de la Tour, and it conveyed the intelligence that he was about to become located for some weeks in the neighbourhood of Fernley, having received an invitation from his friend Alick Boisragon, to join his cousin and himself at Heather Lodge.

“ Deuce take that fellow ! he’s coming to haunt me again, I suppose ;” was poor Joseph’s inward expression of dissatisfaction, as he laid the letter down ; but he only said aloud—“ How, in the name of fate, has he managed to get this invitation I wonder—Edith, do let us go over and see Miss Egerton, and find out all about it.”

Now Edith had her own private reasons for not being particularly pleased with this piece of news ; and was quite as anxious as Joseph to discover when the party were

expected at the lodge ; so she offered no opposition to her cousin's proposal, and they set off together for Fernley Cottage at once.

" *You* will make all the enquiries, Edith," said the bashful Joseph, as they walked on slowly, both much more wrapt up in their own thoughts than usual ; " Miss Egerton will be better pleased to answer you than she would be to answer me."

" Nonsense," replied his companion, (she had not been quite so kind to the poor fellow since Margaret's lecture), " nonsense, Joseph, why should you not ask her yourself ; you know you are a favourite of the beautiful *fiancée*."

This was partly true ; for Joseph's genuine praises of her brother Alick had warmed Nettia's heart towards him ; and besides, the straightforward sincerity of her character, led her to prefer his simplicity (laughable as it sometimes was) to his sister's excessive affectation and frivolity.

"You must ask her yourself," repeated Edith, in an authoritative tone, and Joseph, in this case, as in every other, yielded to the will of his despotic idol.

Miss Egerton received her visitors with the most beaming smiles—she was looking more lovely than ever this morning, and the cause was soon apparent, for, with charming blushes, she communicated in a low tone of voice to Edith, that Sir Stuart Bernarde and her brother Alick would arrive at Heather Lodge the beginning of the following week.

"I congratulate you sincerely," Edith replied in her gentle, musical tones, and pressing Nettia's hand affectionately. "You must be very, very happy."

"Almost too happy, I fear," the other said, with a serious expression appearing for a moment on her face. "I am sure I never, never can be worthy of Stuart's generous affection."

"Banish such humiliating ideas," Edith answered with a slight curl of her lip ;

“depend upon it no man is too perfect ; and though I know nothing of Sir Stuart Bernarde, I’ll venture to say he is not a hundredth part so good as yourself.”

This was treason to the boundless trustfulness of Nettia’s love ; but she was not given to vehement expressions of any kind, so her only reply was—

“You will think otherwise when you become acquainted with him, Miss Lascelles—Then, your wonder will be, how he could have chosen as he has done.”

“Well, well, I suppose you are wise to say and think so. You have made me quite impatient to see this phoenix. Pray bring him to the Manor-house soon.”

Miss Egerton smiled and assured Edith that she should have an opportunity of judging for herself as speedily as possible, and then, as there came a pause in this half whispered conversation, Joseph Armstrong, blushing to his ears, advanced towards Nettia, and enquired whether Alick had mentioned anything to her of an

invitation he had sent to Monsieur de la Tour."

"Oh yes," she said, making the poor bashful young man sit down beside her. "I can tell you all about it. Alick, as you know, is the kindest hearted creature in the world, and this young Frenchman has kept up a sort of straggling correspondence with him since the summer he came to stay with us in Devonshire. I cannot say I like him much myself, but dear Alick sees no faults in anybody ; and Monsieur de la Tour, having complained bitterly in one of his recent letters, of the loneliness he experienced amongst strangers, my brother asked permission of Sir Stuart to send him this invitation. I was not aware that the matter was entirely settled ; but as it will please Alick to be the means of conferring pleasure on an old friend, I am glad that it is so—we shall muster quite a large party by the time the Spring comes fully on."

This was all Nettia said upon the subject—it was one that possessed very little

interest for her, and Edith and Joseph, neither of them much elated by what had passed, walked home again in thoughtful silence, unmindful that the birds were singing sweetly above them, and the early primroses peeping from the green banks, and shedding a faint but delicious perfume on the still, balmy air.

CHAPTER XIV.

SIR STUART BERNARDE.

It was another soft, sunny, delightful morning at the end of February, one of those cheering foretastes of the later spring which generally visit our English climate before the winter is well over, and after a long continuation of the coldest weather has made a sweet southern breeze trebly welcome, to the shrinking, shivering frame.

The cottage gardens about the quiet village of Fernley were beginning to look bright with their yellow and purple crocuses, and the green banks of the sheltered lanes were covered with pale primroses, and violets, that peeped from amongst thick tufts of emerald moss, and made the passers by remember their days of happy childhood, when it was joy to them to fill their laps or baskets with these fragrant treasures, though only perchance to scatter in wanton playfulness again.

Ah! those days of childhood! those days of wild flowers, and green meadows, and sunny hills—why is it that, amidst all the vain and feverish dreams of life, the memory of them will come back to the heart, like a cool, pure spring, rising at intervals, to water a parched and withering ground?

Well for us that it is so—well, indeed, that there does exist one gentle, unobtrusive spell, to keep our souls from hardening

in their forced, but too often willing contact, with selfishness and sin.

* * * *

Pollock, in his most talented and admirable work, 'The Course of Time,' has chosen for one of his descriptive scenes of the world's innocent delights, a young girl, waiting at a chosen trysting place, the return of a long absent lover. Such joy as she would feel, he evidently considers permitted joy—joy that the great Creator will not disapprove, and upon which the angels might look and smile. It is of course, presumed, in the poet's ideal scene, that the girl is pure and pious, and the lover, one that both her conscience and judgment can approve.

Such a girl as Antoinette Egerton ; such a lover as, she believes at least, Sir Stuart Bernarde to be.

And there she is sitting now, alone in her aunt's little parlour, and looking quite fresh and fair and lovely enough for any poet's or painter's ideal ; for, expectation has given a warmer tint to her cheek—a brighter light to her eye ; and love, pure, virgin love, has put the last, rich colouring over all, and made the really charming picture complete.

Sir Stuart Bernarde is every moment expected ; he was to arrive at the lodge with her brother Alick, the night before ; and poor Nettia had sat up till long after midnight, thinking it just possible that they, or at any rate, *he* might come over to the cottage at once. She had felt a little bit disappointed at first—and perhaps, a very, very little bit wounded ; but this last was an exceedingly brief sensation ; as humility, or mistrust of her own merits and deserts, was one of the strongest features in Nettia's character ; it amounted, indeed, almost to a weakness, as I shall have occasion to shew you by-and-bye.

At present, you would rather, I daresay, witness the meeting of the lovers.

“My dear, my dear,” exclaimed Miss Eliza Cargill, abruptly peeping into the room. “Sir Stuart will be here in an instant. I have been watching for you from the attic window ; and I see him coming down the road. He is quite alone, so good bye ; nobody shall disturb you—you are looking very nicely, dear.”

Nettia was not expected to make any reply to this communication ; the good-natured aunt was perfectly satisfied with the look of grateful acknowledgment she received ; and, in an instant, the door was shut again, and the young, happy girl, alone with her beating heart.

There were no presentiments—no fears of any kind, to interfere with the pure delight of this so longed for moment.

And now the garden gate is heard to open—a rapid footstep approaches—she raises her blushing face at length, and goes a few paces nearer the window—then a

film seems to pass before her sight, and she has no distinct consciousness of anything else, till she feels her lover's arms encircling her, and hears him fondly whispering those magic words—

“My own—my own!”

I do not intend to admit my readers quite into the inner sanctuary of a real love scene; I wish, indeed, to have as little as possible to do with these things, and my only object, in the present case, has been to make them comprehend how entirely Nettia's attachment had become a part of herself. This is but a hacknied term; but it expresses what I mean—that her love for Sir Stuart Bernarde was interwoven with every feeling, every hope, every thought or dream of the future. Had it been otherwise, the habitual calm serenity of her character could never have been disturbed, as it was, at the simple prospect of meeting him after a few months' absence.

I am inclined to believe, that, in a general way, it is much safer and better for such natures as these to pass through life without contracting an attachment. It seems such a pity that the thoroughly earnest, faithful-hearted ones—so rare as they are in this false world of ours—should stake their all upon the hazard of a man's uncertain love.

Better, far better, that they should walk on for ever alone and unsupported, than having chosen a staff to lean upon—and encircled it with the fresh wreaths of their own pure and honest devotion—find it suddenly give way beneath their hold, leaving nothing but the broken wreaths as memorials of their fatal error.

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“And now, my Annie,” said Sir Stuart, as, after the lapse of nearly three hours, he prepared to take leave, (reluctantly enough, you may be sure)—“and now, my Annie, you must promise me never to admit any foolish presentiments into that brave little heart of your’s again. I am glad you told me of them, though ; every proof of confidence, on your part, is precious to me ; we must have no secrets now, love.”

“No fear of me, Stuart,” Nettia replied, with a smile of such boundless faith and devotion. “You see, I could not even keep this silly little matter from you, thoroughly ashamed of it, as I am.”

“You have done quite right, Annie ; and, do you know, I feel almost pleased at the discovery of this shadow of a weakness in you, for I have sometimes thought that you were too much my superior in moral strength, that my masculine love of guiding, sheltering, and protecting, would have no chance of being gratified where

you were concerned. I am positively glad to know that you *can* be weak and timid, at times—for has not my lamb found a shepherd?"

There spoke out the true, unmistakeable, natural spirit of *man*—he must be the strong and mighty one, he must be the ruler and the guide; his pride will hardly brook even equality in his help-mate—the ivy must cling for support round the noble oak, but the oak cares nothing for those plants that can grow and flourish alone.

And if men would only take a little more trouble to exalt their own natures, to fortify their minds, to discipline their too often selfish hearts, what woman would not gladly, joyfully fulfil the law of nature, and cling, through life, ay, even unto death, round him, who should be her master, her superior, her protector, and her guide.

The true woman was equally exemplified in Nettia's reply to her lover.

“In all and everything, Stuart, you are far, far above me, and my utmost earthly ambition is to render myself worthy of your affection.”

Here then we will leave them, for the present, in the full possession of youth's dearest bliss, entirely satisfied with each other, and dreaming, when they had leisure to dream at all, of that bright paradise of love which is generally supposed to lay beyond the smiling shores of matrimony.

CHAPTER XV.

A MORNING VISIT.

THREE weeks had passed since Sir Stuart Bernarde's arrival at Fernley, and during the whole of this time, the party at the Manor had been cut off from all communication with the party at the cottage, owing chiefly to the blustering March winds, which kept everybody at home, and a little, perhaps, to the known engagements of Miss Egerton, which her kind

young friends would not interfere with for the world—though, to tell the truth, they would, some of them, have given much more than they chose to acknowledge, for a sight of the fair Nettia's lover—the proud Scotsman of Heather lodge.

Edith had grown tired of smiling upon her cousin Joseph, and had become, indeed, from pure *ennui*, very irritable, and discontented with everybody. In vain, the ever patient Margaret suggested occupations for her—in vain reminded her of the courtesy due to the guests she had herself invited—the spoiled child of a weak father, and too partial sister, turned peevishly from just reproof, and took no pains to cultivate a more amiable frame of mind. Louisa and Martha Armstrong fortunately did not care sufficiently for attentions from their own sex, to be affected, or even offended at this capricious conduct; and, indeed, just now they were too seriously engaged in freshening up their nearly exhausted stock of finery, against the

arrival of their fresh beau, to notice Edith in any way.

But with poor unhappy Joseph, it was otherwise.

The cup had been raised to his lips (as he would have expressed himself had nature made him sentimental—which it had not) only to be dashed down in utter mockery of his hopes—and what remained for him to do ?

He was not a person to hang or shoot himself, as some young gentlemen, in his situation, would have relieved their feelings by doing, neither was he a person to sow the seeds of literary ambition amongst the ashes of his wasted affection, by writing verses about his broken heart, and his false, false love. Joseph could no more have made a rhyme, than he could have composed a French dictionary—so this very common method of consolation never once occurred to him—poor fellow, how should it ?

But I will tell you what *did* occur to

him, and how he acted under the new light that had suddenly burst in upon his somewhat obtuse brain.

He began to think there must be a good and particular reason for Edith's indifference to his really sincere and honest devotion. Looking at himself in a moral point of view (he had previously consulted the mirror in his bed-room, and turned away with perfect satisfaction from what he there saw reflected)—looking at himself, I say, in a moral point of view, Joseph Armstrong made the wonderful discovery that he was not only a most unworthy, but a most ignorant individual, and that unless he altered very much indeed, it was quite nonsense to suppose that Edith would ever care one atom for him.

You will all admit, that this really was an unusual and extraordinary discovery for a boy, like Joseph, to make—but you must remember that love was his tutor at present, and there is no end (as everybody knows) of the stupendous discoveries that

young archer's votaries are constantly arriving at. Unfortunately they do not all of them turn their enlightenment to such good purpose as Mr. Armstrong did.

He set about remedying his deficiencies as quickly as possible ; and having an idea that reading immensely, whatever books he could get, must be the first great step towards improving his mind, he installed himself, every morning, in the major's well filled library, and read away, as he would have said himself, for his very life.

Of course he met with much—very much in his present studies that was perfect greek and hebrew to him ; but this did not discourage the young student in the least ; the few things he *could* understand were more than enough to satisfy his cravings after knowledge ; and the rest, he conscientiously believed would remain safely stowed away in his brain for some future day of need.

As there were no books of a pernicious

tendency in Major's Lascelles' library, you may suppose that Joseph was doing a very good thing for himself—in fact, this early love affair promised to be of immense advantage to the individual chiefly concerned in it ; and, although Edith (I regret to say) showed a most heartless indifference about her cousin's present pursuits and feelings, the kind hearted Margaret rejoiced sincerely at the fortunate turn his disappointment seemed to have taken. But even she never guessed that the sole object of his new pursuits was to render himself more worthy of that 'bright, particular star,' on which he had gazed so long, and with such vain idolatry.

Nothing had been heard of Monsieur de la Tour since his first letter to Joseph, but those who thought about him concluded that he must have arrived at the lodge ; and the young ladies were in daily expectation of a visit.

A cold, bright, and not unpleasant morning in March, the wind blowing freshly

over the fields, the sun shining dazzlingly on the little brooks, and partially lighting up the distant woods which had worn a look of solemn gloom for such a weary time.

Just this sort of morning it was about three weeks after Sir Stuart's arrival at his snug little box in the hollow.

The weather had tempted Edith and her cousins to take a long walk across the country, and they had returned considerably exhilarated by the exercise, all of them, for a wonder, in good spirits and amiably disposed towards each other.

It was proposed therefore that they should assemble for the rest of the morning in the library, (because that was the most cheerful winter room commanding a view of part of the surrounding country) and that Joseph should read aloud, while the ladies worked or sketched.

Edith had taken out her drawing-book, and was trying to decide which of her numerous attempts she should finish first,

when Margaret came in, and approaching her sister, said quietly—

“Come to the window, Edith, and you will see an old wish of yours realized at last. There are two persons, and both of them gentlemen, crossing my rustic bridge ; remember henceforth you are not to presume to despise it.”

It was not Edith alone, but the whole party who immediately rushed to the window, and extraordinary was the excitement prevailing when it was discovered that one of these gentlemen bore a striking resemblance to Monsieur de la Tour, and that they appeared decidedly to be coming in the direction of the Manor House.

There was very little reading or drawing or working, during the ensuing twenty minutes, for though the pedestrians were lost sight of, before it was possible to decide for certain who they were, nobody seemed to doubt the correctness of their first suspicions ; and to these was added a general belief that the second gentleman

must be Sir Stuart Bernarde, who, in spite of his being an engaged man, was an object of very lively interest to more than he or his own Nettia dreamt of.

At length the suspense of the young party was happily terminated by a loud peal of the hall bell, followed in a few minutes by the entrance of a servant, bearing two cards, which Edith immediately seized upon, and read aloud—

“Monsieur Eugène de la Tour,” “Mr. A. Boisragon.”

“Shew them in here,” she said to the man, who had waited to know if the strangers were to be thus privileged. “And stay, Peter,—did they ask for me or for Mr. Armstrong?”

“For both, miss,” was the reply ; and Peter vanished to execute his orders.

“Oh,” exclaimed Joseph, drawing a long breath, while his sisters arranged their hair by the little mirrors in their work-boxes ; and Edith tapped her foot either nervously or impatiently on the floor.

“ Oh ! you’ll all see him then.”

“ Well, you *have* made a wonderful discovery, Joe ;” said Miss Martha, curling her lip, slightly, (probably to see how a contemptuous expression suited her face.) “ Of course we shall see both the gentlemen ; and I’m sure it will be quite a novelty — won’t it, Edith ?”

“ Certainly,” said the young lady addressed, in a very absent manner, and as she spoke the door was thrown open, and the two friends announced.

The Frenchman came in first with all his old assurance and affectation.

“ Miss Lascelles I am enchanted at the happiness of meeting you once more. Allow me to present my friend, Mr. Boisragon ; he has heard of you from his charming sister, and is most anxious to have the honour of your acquaintance.”

Edith received them both, as you can well imagine, with perfect ease and gracefulness, and having waited till all the other

salutations and introductions had been duly gone through, she recommended Monsieur de la Tour to seat himself between her two fair and smiling cousins, and invited Alick Boisragon to take a chair next to her own.

Poor Joseph was, as usual, quite left out of the arrangement, so he resumed his book, and appeared to forget that he was not the sole occupant of the room.

It is astonishing how well young people of opposite sexes get on together in a *tête-à-tête*, when there is no one to listen to, or interrupt them. They are pretty sure to discover, in a wonderfully short space of time, kindred thoughts, kindred feelings, and very often kindred aspirations after some ideal good or happiness that has hitherto eluded their most ardent search. I have positively known such confidences made after an hour's acquaintance, and I am quite sure there is no

commoner foundation stone for romantic attachments than this.

Miss Lascelles and Mr. Boisragon were both of a poetical and imaginative turn of mind, but here all resemblance between them ceased. They fell, however, into the very usual error of thinking they must be kindred spirits, because they sympathized in a keen admiration of poetry, nature, heroism, and so forth. Their tastes (the result of gentle training, almost unlimited freedom of thought and action, and the constant study of works of imagination) were undoubtedly very much the same, but their hearts, their tempers, their dispositions, (nature's own modelling,) could anything be more distinct. But how they were chattering away, in this their first meeting. What a variety of subjects they discussed and argued upon, and how animated they both became, and how delightfully handsome they both looked. Cousin Joseph glanced at them stealthily over his

large book (it was Hume's History of England,) and the splendid pageantry of Elizabeth's visit to Kenilworth became a mere succession of hideous phantoms dancing before his dizzy eyes. And Monsieur Eugène, in the midst of his two companions' charming *agaceries*, directed more than one uneasy look towards the pair he had just made known to each other. Even Louisa and Martha, engrossed as they were in trying to fascinate their old favourite, found time to observe what was going on, and to shrug their shoulders, while they made their faces express a due proportion of virtuous contempt and indignation.

But all this was lost upon the very happy and unconscious pair. They had talked themselves into brilliant spirits, and even the lapse of time was forgotten, as anybody might have discovered, from the startled look they both gave, when Monsieur de la Tour reminded his friend, in

rather a sharp voice, that their visit had been a most unconscionable one, and that Sir Stuart would be waiting dinner for them.

“Good-bye, Miss Lascelles,” said Alick, rising instantly. “*I* have too good an excuse for my oblivion of time, to render any apology necessary. We shall meet again.”

Edith did not reply ; but she put her hand in his as frankly as though they had known each other for years ; and the gentle, almost timid pressure, he ventured to bestow on it, met no discouragement in her soft, half-pensive smile, and down-cast eyes.

There was one standing behind, waiting his turn to touch those small, fair fingers, who might have warned Alick Boisragon against that most bewitching smile, those gentle, captivating ways. And why should he not do it ? From Edith he had received only cruel, treacherous treatment, from Alick,

only unvarying kindness and consideration. Why then should he suffer the last to be sacrificed from a dislike to offend or annoy the first ?

Why, indeed ?

A little patience, and you shall know exactly how it was—what he did, and what he left undone. The above queries were not, however, the suggestions of *his* mind, nor had he anything to do with them. Strange as it may appear, they were Edith's own, the offsprings of her natural apprehensions on the subject.

“ Well, Miss Edith, I *do* hope you enjoyed your flirtation,” said Louisa Armstrong, the moment the door had closed on the young men. “ Upon my word, you managed admirably to get this Adonis all to yourself. And how you *did* talk !”

“ Nay,” observed Martha, who was better skilled in hiding her envious feelings. “ I think you are unjust, my dear Loo. As Monsieur de la Tour chose to seat

himself between you and me, I don't see how Edith could help having the other by her. They did flirt a little, to be sure ; but then, that Alick is certainly divinely handsome--and mewed up as poor Edith is. likely to be in this dull village, you can't wonder at her seizing every opportunity of amusing herself. I'm sure I should do the same, in her place."

It is very doubtful whether Edith understood a single syllable of what her kind cousins were saying—for, during all this time, she was cutting paper into diminutive masculine, profiles, and a variety of other fantastic shapes.

She certainly never attempted to answer either of them ; and when Joseph, having succeeded, at length, in establishing the virgin queen within the walls of Kenilworth, shut his weary book, and drew his chair to her little table, saying—

"Now, may I cut your pencils for you, Edith ?"

She pushed her own seat farther back,
and muttered impatiently,

“Do go away—I hate to have people so
close to me !”

CHAPTER XVI.

SIR STUART AND HIS GUESTS.

THREE gentlemen were lingering over their wine that same evening in a small, plainly-furnished dining-room, where a huge, pleasant fire was blazing. I will try to describe them to you.

The eldest of the party, who was about eight-and-twenty or thirty years of age, possessed few claims to personal beauty. He was too fair, and his eyes were too blue

to suit the otherwise grave, almost stern, expression of his highly intellectual countenance. Yet it was a good, and at times, an exceedingly pleasing face, in spite of these apparent contradictions.

The mouth was small and well cut, and there was something strikingly interesting and even remarkable in his smile; instead of imparting an animated expression to the countenance, as the smiles of most persons do, it only converted the gravity of his aspect into a gentle melancholy, which was infinitely more pleasing. This young man had led hitherto a rather solitary existence; he had lost his parents at an early age, and since then, one by one, all his near connections had died away, leaving him their fortunes, it is true, but with them a dreary sadness which though, in general, skilfully concealed, had increased upon him even faster than the broad lands of which he became sole proprietor. He was superstitious too, though this was a weakness he never acknowledged; and proud to an extent that

none save himself had any idea of. A kind, almost tender heart, made him lavishly generous, and good taste, true gentlemanly feeling, caused him to act on all occasions according to the strictest dictates of principle and honour.

This is an exceedingly rough sketch of Sir Stuart Bernarde—the nicer, finer shades of whose character will be more fully developped by and bye.

The next portrait I have to draw is a very different one, and I feel how impossible it will be ever to do justice to it.

To do justice to him—to that rare, that strangely attractive, that thoroughly good, (as far as the heart goes), that universally beloved and admired young man—To Alick Boisragon.

He was much younger than his relative Sir Stuart, about twenty-two, but he looked even less than this, for there was such a perfect halo of freshness (I was going to say innocence, but that does not sound

manly enough, though why men should shrink from being thought innocent I really cannot see) there was, however, such a positive halo of freshness and youth about his face, that it took away several years from his actual age. I have never seen a countenance at all to be compared to it, except in a picture by one of the old masters—Whether it was of a saint, or a hero, or merely a portrait, I have now no idea. All I remember is that it hung up in the gallery of an ancient house where I spent a great portion of my youth, and that I used to go every day and gaze upon it with a never wearying admiration.

Alick Boisragon bore a striking resemblance to this picture. He had the same dark, clustering curls, the same large, glorious eyes, the same delicately chiselled features, and even greater clearness and beauty of complexion. Everybody said he was far too handsome for a man, and the women, young and old, raved about him.

as wildly as they rave about a new Italian singer, or a popular preacher.

A thoughtful person could scarcely look at him without picturing to themselves the adoration the mother of such a son must feel—one could see, at a glance, that he had been reared with singular tenderness and love, that no breath of sorrow or care had dimmed the brightness of his spirit yet—that he believed in virtue, in purity, in all that man still holds sacred; that he was entering life as joyously and hopefully as if it were indeed the paradise it looks!

Already dreaming though, of a gentle Eve, to share with him its captivating pleasures.

The third gentleman is already known to you; and if you like him as little as I do, you will be glad to escape a minute description of Monsieur Eugène de la Tour.

They had been talking about a hunting party, which they were going to join the

following day. Sir Stuart had hitherto kept aloof from this sort of thing, because Nettia did not like it ; and though he called his lodge a hunting box, and had, on former occasions, filled it with zealous sportsmen, he was no lover of such amusements himself, and only pursued them from a craving after excitement of some kind, or to be rid of the importunities of his friends.

But Alick had never yet been present at a hunt, and he had coaxed his sister to withdraw her opposition, for this once, because Lord H ——'s hounds were going to meet just beyond the Fernley woods, and they expected to have a famous day.

There had been a little amicable dispute about the horses, between Alick and the Frenchman, the latter insisting that he was the best rider, and, therefore, entitled to the fleetest hunter. The former, with his usual good nature, yielded the point, at

last, though he had set his heart upon having his cousin's splendid Daphne for himself.

"And now that this important matter is settled," said Sir Stuart, to the young men, "pass the bottle, and let me hear some account of your visit to the Manor-house."

"Ah, you should have been there," replied Alick, eagerly, "we had a charming morning. Joe Armstrong's sisters seem very nice, chatty, agreeable girls. They are pretty, too—don't you think so?"

(This was to Eugène.)

"Oh, they will pass," said that gentleman, in a patronising tone. "And so will Mademoiselle Edith, if one doesn't criticise too closely—don't *you* think so?"

There was a sudden flashing in Alick's eye, as he turned to the insolent speaker, but it soon calmed down again, and he answered quietly—

"I do *not* think Miss Lascelles could

pass anywhere, without exciting the most fervent admiration. She is so unlike everybody else, so piquante, as your fastidious countrymen would say. Stuart (turning to his cousin) I think now I can understand Nettia's eagerness for you to see her ; she wants to have it over. Any other girl but my good sister would smuggle such a dangerous rival out of the way altogether ; but Nettia hasn't one spark of jealousy, I will say that for her."

"*Is* this Edith so very fascinating ?" asked Sir Stuart, with his melancholy smile. "I confess, it always struck me, that our worthy relatives, at the cottage, were a little imaginative in that quarter. They do take such stong fancies occasionally."

"But what did you think of Nettia's testimony ? *she* is not given to flights of the imagination."

"Oh, one girl is never a fair judge of another ; they either praise extravagantly

or abuse ridiculously. Your sister sees everybody through the bright glass of her own sunny mind—however, it seems, in this case, they are all right ; for you, too, have been bewitched by the enchantress.”

“ I ?” exclaimed Alick, looking as though this supposition embraced a new and altogether original idea, which he was trying, in vain, to comprehend. “ What can make you conceive such a thing as that ?”

“ My dear boy, your own prnegyric alone—was it not very enthusiastic, Monsieur de la Tour ?”

“ You should have seen them together,” observed the sarcastic little animal, as a reply to this question. “ There never was such a case of love at first sight. Poor Joseph, who is Mademoiselle’s devoted admirer also, looked at them over a big book he was feigning to read, and grew yellow and purple by turns. Oh, it was a curious and most interesting sight.”

Alick coloured a little, while his friend was talking this nonsense ; but he took it all in good part ; and Sir Stuart gazed at his young kinsman with keen and undisguised interest. He had always considered himself, since the death of Alick's father, somewhat in the light of a guardian to his cousin—he had felt a sincere affection for him, even before he knew Antoinette Egerton, and her devotion to her brother naturally increased Sir Stuart's partiality, as he was far above the littleness (peculiar to some characters) of feeling jealous of the natural affections of those on whose love he had the highest claim.

During his stay in Devonshire, Mrs. Boisragon and himself had frequently discussed Alick's disposition, and they both agreed that an early marriage, with a really good and sensible woman, would be the most probable means of ensuring his happiness. When once Sir Stuart and Nettia were settled, he was to begin his

studies for the bar ; but they did not expect he would do much good in any profession, unless a decided and important object could be found for him. The remembrance of many of these discussions came across Sir Stuart's mind, while Eugène was bantering Alick ; and, looking kindly at the latter, he said—

“ I must really manage to get an introduction to the fair lady of the Manor, and now it will be to gratify my own curiosity as much as to please Annie.”

Eugène whistled a French air, and then walked out alone to smoke a cigar.

The next morning, the three gentlemen were in the stable yard looking after their respective steeds, at an early hour. Sir Stuart had politely chosen the worst for himself ; but they were all fine hunters, and Daphne was said to be the most valuable, and the fleetest in the whole county. The groom was leading her about with honest pride, as Monsieur Eugène came up to look at her.

“You’ll be the best mounted in the whole field, you will, sir,” he said, touching his hat respectfully to his master’s guest. “She’ll shew off finely to-day—she will, for it’s more than six weeks since she’s felt a saddle on her back—bless you, sir, she’ll clear a five-bar gate as easy as you step across a gutter—she makes nothing of any hobstacle—she don’t.”

The Frenchman was puffing away at a perfumed cigar, and a very close observer might have seen that he puffed a little faster while this intelligence was being given. As the man ceased speaking, he also ceased smoking, and laying his hand on Daphne’s neck, asked in a confidential whisper, if the animal had any tricks of shying, kicking, bolting, &c., &c.

“Why, as for that,” said the groom, who had experienced a secret disgust at the idea of mounting such a pigmy of a man on the best hunter in the county. “I can’t say but what she’s skittish at all times, and to-day you see, sir, it’s like she’ll

be something uncommon in that way—but if so be as she bolts, sir, you’ve only to hold her in, and may be, when she’s tired, she’ll stop—most of ’em does, sir, I think ; least ways, we must hope for the best—you know, sir.”

Eugène bestowed one of his darkest looks on the philosophical groom, and throwing away the remnant of his cigar, walked round to Alick, whom he thus addressed,

“ My dear fellow, that Daphne is a splendid creature—she ought to be called Edith—hey ? but upon my word, the more I look at her, the more I reproach myself for my selfishness in taking her from you. They say this ‘Hornet’ that you were going to ride, has some ugly tricks at times, and if any accident happened, I should never—no never, forgive myself—besides it is solely on your account that Sir Stuart consents to go to-day. My mind is quite made up—we will change horses.”

Now Alick Boisragon was not quite such

a fool, as he was content for the occasion to appear, so thanking his friend for the generosity of this offer, he agreed joyfully to the transfer, and in half an hour they were all galloping briskly through the glen.

CHAPTER XVII.

DAPHNE AND HER RIDER.

MISS EGERTON walked over, that morning, to pay a visit to Edith, partly because it had long been owing—partly because, having grown accustomed to see Sir Stuart every day, she did not very well know what to do with herself in his absence. The wisest people, I think, become indolent during the period of courtship. An absorbing passion certainly indisposes the mind for the petty occupations of a woman's life ; and besides this, Nettia was

a bit of a coward about horses and hounds, and could not help picturing her lover and brother exposed to a thousand dangers.

“My dear child, there is no cause for the slightest apprehension,” Mr. Simeon Cargill had said to her, when it was observed that she looked unusually pale at breakfast-time. “Sir Stuart has never had an accident—for his horses are remarkably sure footed and tractable, as I have heard. Then, as for the hounds, you know, my dear, they’re not the sort of dogs that usually go mad—otherwise, I should be the first to take alarm ; for a circumstance occurred to me when I was a boy—”

“Oh, yes! uncle,” said Nettia, repressing a smile ; “you have told me all about that before ; and I really never feared for a moment, that the hounds would go mad. I don’t fear any thing in particular—only I shall be very, very glad, when Stuart and Alick are safe at home again.”

Edith expressed great pleasure at Nettia’s visit ; and, on hearing what had be-

come of the gentlemen, it was agreed that Miss Egerton should stay to luncheon, and that they should all walk in the afternoon, escorted by Joseph, to meet the returning sportsmen. The female Armstrongs had first suggested this plan ; and, as Nettia eagerly acceded to it, Edith thought there could be no impropriety ; and so the matter was settled.

With the aid of books, music, and gossiping, the morning passed quickly away, and about four o'clock the young ladies declared themselves ready ; and Joseph was ordered to attend, because, as Edith whispered to Nettia,

“ It looked better, otherwise they should have done exceedingly well without him.”

“ Poor fellow !” said Nettia, “ it would be a shame to leave him behind ; he is so devoted to you, Miss Lascelles !”

“ Boy’s love,” replied the other, contemptuously ; “ but pray, call me Edith,

for the future. We shall never get on while we 'miss' each other."

It happened to be a very lovely evening—and the young people not only enjoyed their walk extremely, but became very merry and sociable together, and suggested all sorts of pleasant parties for the coming spring. The Armstrongs spoke of a champagne picnic in the woods ; Edith thought she could manage a miniature *fête* in her father's grounds, and Nettia had a vision of the whole party taking tea in her aunt's orchard, with the bright apple blossoms falling around them, and Edith's splendid voice making melody in the scented air !

"Oh ! charming—charming !" was eagerly repeated at the conclusion of each suggestion ; but Joseph, venturing to murmur something about gooseberry fool, or strawberry cream, as an appropriate auxiliary at the orchard banquet, was unanimously voted unworthy of admission, and immedi-

ately condemned to the menial office of lacquey at all the proposed festivals.

They were so merry—so light-hearted—so full of nonsense, that sweet, sunny evening ; and when three or four girl, get together, they do take such delight in victimizing any unfortunate man, young or old, who is imprudent enough to venture amongst them.

They had, hitherto, been walking through the lanes that conducted from the Manor House to the main road ; they concluded the lodge party would return this way, as it was the best and nearest from whence they would probably have to come.

“I see a cloud of dust in the distance,” said Joseph, as they suddenly turned out of the last lane, and entered the ascending road that led to the Fernley woods. “Shall I run forward, and bring you word what it is.”

“Nonsense,” said Edith, we can wait very patiently, till they meet us, can we not, Nettia ?”

Nettia made no reply ; she had got upon a mound of turf by the road side, and was straining her eyes in the direction of the cloul of dust that Joseph had discovered. Edith fancied she had grown pale within the last few seconds.

“ Why, what is the matter with you, Nettia ?” she asked anxiously. “ You look as if you were going to faint.”

The rest of the party had walked on a little, and these two were alone. Nettia descended abruptly from her elevation, and seized Edith’s hand.

“ It is no fancy,” she said in a quick, nervous manner ; “ something is amiss—through that cloud of dust I saw what appeared to me a litter borne between several persons. Look, Edith, look—but it comes on so slowly—I cannot wait.”

“ Stay for pity’s sake !” cried Edith, as the excited girl was about to start off by herself. “ You must not think of such a thing, Nettia. Joseph shall hurry on ; but believe me, it is entirely the effect of im-

agitation Even now, I see nothing but the cloud of dust, and some very dim objects emerging from it, which you may depend will turn out to be the three gentlemen in perfect health and safety. My dear girl, pray calm yourself, and we will sit here to rest for a few minutes."

Pale as death, Nettia stood listening to all her companion said, but her reason evidently remained unconvinced, and she would only agree that Joseph should hasten on, instead of herself, for now her agitation had increased to such an extent, that it was with great difficulty she could either speak or stand.

So placing her, with much tenderness, on the little bank, Edith walked up quickly to the others, and explaining Miss Egerton's unaccountable alarm, desired her ever obedient cousin to run, with all imaginable speed, and ascertain what the advancing object really was. Then, accompanied by the two girls, she returned to Nettia, who

was striving earnestly, but vainly, to recover some portion of composure.

"You must despise me," she said, in a low voice, and with a sickly smile ; " but really I cannot shake off the horror with which that sight has filled me. Look again Edith—do not deceive me. I *feel* that there is something dreadful to learn."

" Good Heavens !" cried Miss Armstrong suddenly, " it looks like a funeral, I declare. It is certainly nobody riding—oh dear, I wish we had not come."

" So do I," said her sister, quite regardless of poor Nettia's sufferings, " I declare I feel quite sick. If it is any accident, I shall be sure to faint."

" Then pray go home, both of you," exclaimed Edith, thoroughly disgusted with their heartlessness and affectation. " You have not far to walk, and you will meet nobody in those quiet lanes."

The sensitive young ladies looked once more steadily up the road, and having, it

is presumed, satisfied themselves that it was not a riding party coming towards them, they hesitated no longer in taking Edith's advice, but turned down the lane at a pace that was better calculated to display the lightness of their heels, than the dignity of their carriage.

It seemed a sensible relief to Nettia to find herself alone with Edith. She stood up now, holding the arm of her companion, trembling still very much, but apparently prepared for the worst. They could both plainly distinguish an object that seemed to be surrounded or carried by several persons walking very slowly. So slowly, they scarcely appeared to move, and yet every moment the group came out clearer against the dark back-ground. Edith had grown excited too from sympathy with her companion; she felt quite affectionately towards Nettia in this her hour of weakness, and the dearest friend or sister could not have shown more tender, loving kind-

ness than she did now. At length a happy thought struck her.

“Dear Nettia, perhaps, after all, it is only that odious little Frenchman who has been thrown—indeed this is by far the most probable, because all foreigners are clumsy riders, and he is so conceited he would be certain to choose a spirited horse. You know we need not care so very much for him. For my part, I think a good fall would be of great service to the creature.”

So she was running on, trying to convince herself, and believing she had imparted a hope to Nettia ; but the latter suddenly stopped her.

“Edith, it is no use. I have been too happy—too completely wrapped up in the love of a human being. May Heaven give me strength to bear the punishment meekly !”

Poor girl ! it was the remembrance of her strange presentiment, just before her lover’s arrival, which caused this obstinate

conviction that it was Sir Stuart who had met with some fearful accident. Her mind refused to bestow a single thought on any other, and Edith might as well have talked to the stones that lay scattered around them.

At length Joseph, who had been forgotten in their intense anxiety, was seen hastening back at almost lightning speed. Nettia covered her eyes for a moment, then, without speaking a word, walked on to meet him ; Edith following close behind.

Panting, flushed, and breathless, the messenger came up to them, and to Miss Egerton's agonized look of enquiry, replied quickly—

“Sir Stuart is quite safe—it is—”

But Nettia could listen to no more ; a violent and hysterical burst of tears relieved her burdened heart, and frightened Joseph so much that his intended communication was deferred until they had placed her on the bank again, and Edith's arm

was twined firmly round her waist. Then he spoke.

“It is your brother, Miss Egerton, who has been thrown from his horse, and is stunned, I believe—but do not be alarmed ; there is a doctor with them, and Sir Stuart told me to assure you it would all be right when they get him home.”

Nettia’s paroxysm was over now—she sprang up, and hastily brushed away the few remaining tears that were stealing from her eyes. Her face was still perfectly white ; but Edith saw that the look of extreme anguish was gone. The brother so long and tenderly beloved, the playmate of old times, was less to her than this stranger, who, with a few honied words, had made himself a place for ever in her true and unsullied heart.

“Shall I ever feel as she feels ?” Edith said to herself, as some such thoughts as these passed dreamily through her mind, and then she hurried after Nettia, (who

had walked on, rapidly enough now, to meet the procession) and said rather nervously—

“You will not want me at present ; but say to Sir Stuart that, if it will be better for your brother not to be carried so far as the lodge, papa will gladly receive him at our house. I am sure of this ; there are plenty of rooms ; and I can go home at once with Joseph, and make preparations for him.”

“Dear Edith,” replied Nettia, trying to steady her trembling voice ; “you are too good—but if it is necessary, or at all better for my brother, I will, indeed, beg them to do it. I might stay with him in this case ; and that would be a great comfort.”

“Go, then,” Edith said, “and let it be settled so. And cheer up, Nettia, we will all assist in curing him.”

She took Joseph’s arm as she spoke, and immediately turned towards home, while Miss Egerton hastened forward in the opposite direction.

"Is he very bad Joseph?"

This was after they had been walking rapidly and without exchanging a word for several minutes.

"Much worse than I told his sister."

"Do you know how it happened?"

"No ; I did not stay to ask."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"Well, how did he look ? Can't you be a little more communicative?"

(This was said very sharply.)

"He looked like a man who has been stunned—like a corpse—if you must have it."

"How dreadful ! but there can be no danger?"

"I don't know. Sir Stuart seemed very frightened himself."

"You are cross, Joseph, because I have asked Nettia to have this poor, dear, suffering creature brought to the Manor. What a brute you must be !"

"I think he would have done quite as

well at his cousin's house. It will look odd —this invitation coming from you—but of course you can please yourself."

"Of course, I can—and as I don't happen to be an Indian savage, or a piece of marble, I cannot see how I could have acted otherwise—but men have no feeling —except for themselves. Come, do let us walk a little faster!"

* * * * *

Major Lascelles was sitting half-asleep in his easy chair by the fire, when Edith hastily opened the door of his room.

"Papa—dear papa, do wake up. I have something particular to say to you!"

"Eh?—what!" with a sudden start and a wrinkling of the brows, that smoothed again as he saw who it was that addressed him.

“Papa, you know there was a meeting of the hounds to-day—Lord H——’s hounds—and the young man who called here yesterday, Miss Egerton’s brother, has been thrown from his horse, and is very badly hurt. They are bringing him along the road in an insensible state ; and I have told his sister he can stop here if the lodge is too far—you know, papa, there are lots of spare rooms, and Margaret is such a capital nurse, if he should require nursing—so this is all I had to tell you ; and now you can finish your nap, while I go and get everything ready for Mr. Boisragon.

“My dear child,” the Major began, gazing at Edith with his usual earnestness ; “you have been too hasty in this affair—you should—”

But the dear child threw her arms round his neck, and whispered in her caressing tones,

“It will all be right ! I have done the wisest thing in the world. Now *dors, papa, dors !*”

With Margaret there was not the smallest difficulty. She heard that a fellow creature was suffering, perhaps dying, and all her energies were awake in a moment. Perhaps she did not exhibit quite so much enthusiasm as her sister, but then the sympathy she felt, and the trouble she was prepared to take, would have been just the same had Mr. Simeon Cargill, or Monsieur Eugène de la Tour been the object in question. And this is more than can be said of Edith.

However, they both bestirred themselves diligently in getting a comfortable room prepared, and the elder sister was quite surprised at the bustling activity of the younger one, and the really clever way in which she set about the unaccustomed work of kindling an obstinate fire into a blaze, changing tables and chairs, and all the other necessary preparatives for the reception of a sick stranger in a long untenanted apartment.

The Misses Armstrong volunteered their

services on hearing what was going on, but Edith declined any further assistance, and recommended them, (as their nerves were in so sensitive a state,) to keep to their own rooms till dinner time.

Then the two sisters, having arranged everything to their satisfaction, went down together to receive the party, who were now coming slowly along the terrace.

CHAPTER XVIII.

EDITH AND MISS EGERTON'S LOVER.

It was two hours later. The doors of the Manor-house had opened to admit a human body, from which every sign of life appeared to have departed, and a pale, trembling girl bowed down with horror and dread. Others had followed in their train, but these two claimed the deepest sympathy, excited the most anxious fears. The brother was now stretched upon his

bed attended by the good Margaret, the village surgeons, and his almost distracted cousin ; but the doors were fast closed from within, and no other person could be admitted yet.

Thus it had been from the time of their arrival at the house.

The sister was with Edith in an apartment very near to her brother's, weeping bitterly, almost hopelessly.

"I could and would stifle my own grief," she was saying, amidst the pauses of her gushing tears, "but the thought of my mother, my poor mother! upsets me quite. You can form no notion of her adoration for Alick; this blow will kill her, or drive her mad. And I left her so happy, so full of hope—Edith, have patience with me. I cannot be courageous yet."

"My poor girl, my dear Nettia, nobody could expect you to be courageous ; but still you must try not to despair. If there had really been no hope, we should have heard something before this—Sir

Stuart would have come to you instead of staying there, if—if they had not succeeded in restoring consciousness to your brother—Depend upon it all is going right, and you will very soon be admitted into the room.”

“I dare not think so, Edith,” she went on, raising her face from between her clasped hands, and looking more wretched than her companion had ever seen a human being look before. “I dare not think so, because Stuart warned me against being too sanguine. Mr. Armstrong’s statement led me to think lightly of the accident, and I was so grateful—so happy, to find my first fears dissipated, that I readily believed it was as he said, till I saw poor Alick, and heard the real state of the case. They may restore him to consciousness, but Stuart fears more for the injuries done to his chest by the kicks of that dreadful horse. Fancy a lingering illness for a creature so spoiled as dear Alick has been. Fancy an early death for one so

thoughtless—so light hearted—so full of all life's hopes—so totally unprepared for the life to *come*!”

Nettia shuddered as she spoke, and again buried her face in her hands, while Edith sat looking at her with true and tender sympathy—oppressed, too, with that strange, new feeling, which people experience the first time they find themselves in the presence of real, unaffected suffering. She had no more consolation to offer—she was quite unskilled in the blessed art of pouring balm on the wounded spirit—of cheering the drooping soul, by reminding it of that All-merciful Hand, from which the chastening comes. To her, sorrow of whatever nature, was simply sorrow, and she would as soon have thought of ascribing it to diabolical agency, as of connecting it with that necessary purifying of the heart, which Christians are taught to expect, and exhorted even to be thankful for.

With Nettia it was certainly somewhat

different—the good seed had not fallen here on altogether stony ground ; but she was neither strong enough, nor wise enough, to bear, with perfect patience, the first stroke of the chastening rod.

“ Will they never have finished this consultation?—will there be no end to this torturing suspense ?” So she was going on, with her hands clasped tightly together, and her eyes fixed strainingly on the passage door.

At length a step was heard, and both the girls instantly started up. It was Margaret, and she came in softly, and took Nettia’s trembling hands.

“ My dear Miss Egerton, I am afraid your courage and patience have been severely tried ! but Sir Stuart would not allow me to come to you till I could bring good news. Your brother has recognized his cousin, though he has not spoken intelligibly yet—however, both the surgeons think now, that he will do well, and you may go to him as soon as you like.”

Nettia did not wait for a second invitation. With one beaming glance of recovered hope, she hastily left the room, and Margaret remained with her sister.

"Is he really better?" the latter asked when the door had closed upon Miss Egerton.

"Yes, he is better, because they have succeeded in recalling his senses; but they have fears yet for the *perfect* restoration of his mental faculties; it seems he was thrown on his head, and the only wonder is, that instant death was not the result."

"But how shocking, Margaret," exclaimed Edith, becoming quite pale, "such a fine, intellectual, charming creature as Alick Boisragon, to have his mind clouded for ever by an apparently simple accident such as this—oh it cannot be, I am certain—what should these village doctors know?"

"We will hope for the best, Edith," replied Margaret, adding, after a short pause, during which she looked earnestly

at her sister—"By the bye, you saw this young man yesterday—did I not hear one of the Armstrongs accusing you of having flirted with him?"

"Oh, some nonsense, I dare say—I certainly talked to him in preference to his companion; but you know everything goes by the name of flirting now-a-days."

"Well, Edith, we need not discuss the matter, at present. I have asked Sir Stuart Bernarde to take some dinner; and as I find papa and the Armstrongs have already had theirs in the library I must beg you to do the honours, when it is served, as Joseph would never have courage to entertain a stranger, and I have so many things to attend to, for the poor invalid."

"Very well, Margaret," Edith said; "but I shall make that foolish Joseph sit at table, whether he opens his lips or not."

“As you please, my love. I believe you will find Sir Stuart in the dining-room now.”

So Edith, after smoothing her hair a very little, went down; but Sir Stuart was not there, and she began stirring the fire, and drawing up the blinds, and arranging the chairs—all because she felt a very uncommon sort of embarrassment at the idea of meeting Nettia’s lover, for the first time.

(She had only caught a passing glimpse of him as he came in with Alick and the others.)

At length, just as she had seated herself in a large easy chair by the fire, and had begun to recover from her unaccountable nervousness, a rapid footstep approached; and presently Sir Stuart, looking very pale, though calm, came in, and saluted his young hostess with rather distant courtesy. Edith immediately rang for dinner, and Joseph Armstrong; and when

they both made their appearance, she led the way to the table, and placed the stranger guest at her own right hand.

He could not eat, however, and he appeared still less inclined to talk. It was a sort of solemn farce, this mute dinner party, and yet one, that they none of them had sufficient energy to abridge. Sir Stuart sat looking into his wine glass gloomily, and sent away each plate nearly untouched ; Edith played with her knife and fork, while she watched Miss Egerton's lover ; and Joseph watched them both by turns, wondering why Edith thought it necessary to remain at table under the circumstances of the case.

But Edith's heart was really touched by the sight of this proud man's genuine suffering, and she had no intention of leaving him until she had tried, at least, to speak a few words of comfort and sympathy. Joseph's presence made this more difficult than it would otherwise have been, but

still some opportunity might arise ; and she resolved to wait for it.

When the servants had retired, after removing the cloth, Sir Stuart roused himself, and began to apologise for his complete abstraction during dinner.

“ This has been such a sudden blow,” he said, despondingly, “ that I have been quite unable to fortify my mind or school my heart to bear it like a man. Nature has not made me very hopeful, nor have the circumstances of my life at all tended to remedy this defect.”

“ But reason and intelligence will often successfully combat it,” said Edith, gently ; “ and, in the present case, I should think the exercise of these faculties would enable you to look forward, at least, without despair, even if you cannot be very hopeful. Mr. Boisragon is so young that it will surely be easy to anticipate a favourable termination to his illness ; and my sister tells me that the surgeons them-

selves are not in the least fearful of the result."

This was far from being strictly true ; but Edith said it because she wished to cheer her melancholy companion ; and her conscience (as we have seen before) was not apt to be very tender on these points.

"Is this indeed your sister's impression?" asked Sir Stuart, with startling eagerness of manner. "I had thought differently from what they said about my poor cousin ! but Miss Lascelles must have a clearer judgment than I am endowed with just now ; and, Heaven knows, I am too ready to catch at a straw in this most unhappy case."

A servant here entered to summon Joseph Armstrong to his sisters ; and half glad to be released, half reluctant to leave Edith even with the betrothed of another, he got up, and, after a slight and rather awkward apology, slowly left the room

And now, instead of following his example, Sir Stuart Bernarde, having tasted one drop of comfort from Edith's lips, quietly resigned himself to her very gentle and earnest efforts at consolation. There is no man, I believe, however solely afflicted, who will remain long insensible to words of cheering from the mouth of a pretty woman. There is a powerful fascination to some natures in being the objects of unaffected sympathy, and Sir Stuart's was a nature of this sort. Perhaps he scarcely knew himself how very sweet and soothing, that low, soft voice had grown to his ear ; and he most assuredly had no notion of the time he had passed in listening to it.

The clock on the mantel-piece suddenly roused him to a sense of his forgetfulness ; but before he could comment on the lateness of the hour, the door opened quietly, and Nettia's pale face revealed itself.

"Stuart," she said ; and then stopped abruptly, gazing for a moment with a

strange, half startled expression at her lover and Edith. "Stuart," she resumed, without advancing farther into the room, "it is very late—will you not see Alick again before you go?"

CHAPTER XIX.

LOVE.

SIX weeks have passed since the conclusion of the last chapter ; and it is now the month of May—such a May as in these degenerate times we rarely have the good fortune to see—bright, warm, cheering, and garlanded with flowers. The old Manor-house of Fernley has cast aside its gloomy aspect, and is decked in all the brilliant jewels of spring. The tall chesnuts wave in the light breeze, and bend to kiss the pale lilacs that are shedding their

perfume on the pure air ; and amongst the leafy branches birds carol joyously, and everything in nature is beginning that beautiful song of thanksgiving which will last as long as one breath of summer remains to enchant the earth.

But these six weeks have brought other and more important changes than the gradual and anticipated awakening of external nature. Old Father Time often works more rapidly within stone walls than amongst lawns and trees ; and on this occasion the interior of Fernley Manor had not been forgotten, while he was clothing it so charmingly without.

We will draw aside the curtain and contemplate the first scene.

It is a small but tastefully furnished room, opening on the broad terrace, and commanding a view of all the prettiest points of the estate, the distant woods forming a rich back-ground, and giving a subdued tone to the whole prospect, on which a young man, the only occupant of

the apartment is gazing with an earnest melancholy that would ill accord with his very youthful aspect, if physical suffering and debility were not so strongly marked in his every look and movement. He is reclining languidly on a low sofa that has been drawn close to the open window, and a table, plentifully supplied with books and newspapers, stands close beside him, though he appears unconscious, or unmindful of the presence of these mute companions ; continuing to gaze at the charming scene without, and sighing constantly in a strange, absent manner to himself.

But presently a quick, light footstep advances along the passage—he turns to listen to it—a deep colour suffuses his sallow cheek, his eyeslight into wondrous brilliancy, and his countenance positively glows with animation, as the door opens gently, and Edith Lascelles comes softly and smilingly into the room.

“ See, Alick, what I have brought you,” holding out to him a magnificent bunch of

flowers, just tied carelessly together with a blade of grass. “This is to do honour to your convalescence—do you know I have been running all over the garden and shrubberies to collect these treasures, and because I heard you say the other day you loved the pink hawthorn, I scrambled up on a wooden bench to reach you a piece (I am such a little dwarf you see), and tore my poor fingers with the nasty thorns in a most shocking manner—look ; did any mortal ever behold such hands.”

All this time the young man was gazing, with a sort of rapt devotion, at the animated speaker, and when she held out her tiny white hands, disfigured, as much as such hands could be, by one or two long scratches, it seemed as if it was a painful effort to him to refrain from seizing them in his own, and pressing them to his heart and to his lips.

Edith must have seen something of this, for poor Alick’s face, though changed by suffering, still revealed each passing

thought as clearly as it had ever done, but she took no further notice of it than by speaking in a somewhat graver tone, while she began to arrange the beautiful flowers in a pair of vases that stood on the table near the invalid.

“You are always so kind and thoughtful,” he said, after a pause of several minutes, during which he had been silently watching her occupation. “Every hour, Edith, adds something to the vast debt of gratitude I owe to you and your sister—and I shall never, never be able to pay one tithe of it—this makes me unhappy.”

“Oh pray, my dear friend, get rid of that excessive and inordinate sensitiveness of yours—do believe me when I tell you for the ten thousandth time, that you owe us no gratitude, or, if you do, it will be amply repaid by the pleasure of your society, now you are well again.”

There was a peculiar depression, tinged too with bitterness in Alick's tone, as he answered—

“ *Once* I might have found it possible to accept those flattering words as genuine, Edith ; but they only mock me *now*.”

“ What *do* you mean ?” said his companion, turning round quickly, and fixing her eyes on the young man ; though with more of a chiding than an enquiring expression.

“ Ah, you know what I mean, Edith,” he replied, still more dejectedly. “ It is not my body alone that has been weakened by that most unhappy accident ; as my physical strength returns, I feel how completely my mind has been shaken ; all the bright hopes and ardent aspirings of my youth will henceforth appear to me like fiends, whose mission is to torture the sinking heart—perhaps goad it at last to madness—Ah, mine is truly a cruel fate, Edith ; and if I did not believe that death would soon release me, it would be quite impossible for me to bear it, even as I do.”

Edith drew a chair close to the sofa, and

gently laid her hand on Alick's arm. Her touch seemed to thrill through all his frame while the languid eyes brightened into life again ; but she kept her hand where she had placed it, and spoke earnestly and kindly.

“ Alick, did you not promise your sister, and your cousin, and me, to fight valiantly against these foolish and unfounded fancies ? Indeed, indeed, it is very wicked, as well as very unwise to encourage such fantastical ideas. You have heard of people becoming idiots or madmen from falls and such like accidents, and so you must needs go and imagine that your fate is to be a similar one ; as if we should not all have found it out if there had been anything of the kind, long before this—but really invalids are such visionary beings, particularly when they are getting well, that there is no reasoning with them ; and the only rational plan in my opinion is to treat them like naughty children, and scold them into good behaviour.”

Poor Alick was faintly smiling now, so his monitress ceased speaking, and was about to move her chair ; but he caught the little hand he had not ventured to touch before, and pressing it, almost wildly, compelled her to remain.

“Do not leave me alone this morning, Edith. I have such a dread of solitude—besides, it does me good to talk to you. Stuart looks grave as death when I mention those gloomy fancies of mine—and Nettia generally cries—and your sister Margaret begins her eloquent sermons—which, beautiful as they are, do not benefit me half so much as the simplest sentence from your lips. Nay, I am not flattering, Edith ; a poor, shattered, dying creature, such as I am, may, surely, be allowed to speak the truth—and you know what the truth is in this case, as well as I could tell you. Stay with me, then, I implore you or how shall I be prepared to receive my mother ?”

“Well, Alick, I will stay,” Edith said

“if you promise to be exceedingly good, and not to talk any more on forbidden subjects. Surely, we need be at no loss for conversation—do you remember how we rattled on together the first day we met ?”

A sudden spasm of agony convulsed poor Alick's face at these thoughtlessly uttered words—he became quite pale—then almost gasped for breath ; and Edith, terribly frightened at his agitation, knelt down by the sofa, and implored him to speak to her and to forgive her.

“You see what I am,” he said, at last, with such a sickly and unnatural smile ; “my mind has lost all strength to combat its sufferings. Edith, unless some powerful change is shortly wrought in me, I shall become the companion of those ill-fated beings you spoke of just now ; and exchange the society of ministering angels for that of—”

“Hush—hush now, or I will leave you at once,” said Edith, laying her hand upon

the speaker's mouth. "Is this the way you prepare yourself for seeing your poor mother, who expects to find you all but well? And pray, sir, is it by such lively conversation as this, that you intend to entertain the party who have been bidden to celebrate your first day of coming down. Really, I had hoped better things after all those fair promises of yours!"

In spite, however, of her light manner of talking, Edith's voice was tremulous; and the unhappy young man saw, or fancied he saw, that she did not think his words so wild as she feigned to do. But there was something in the sympathy of this creature of his secret worship—this angel of his warm imagination, that consoled him for much that he was enduring; and throwing off, by an earnest effort, the outward gloom that had oppressed him, he resigned himself for the moment, to the enchantment of her sweet presence.

“ See then, Edith, how well I will keep my promise. Sit here, beside me ; let me watch your tiny fingers weaving that silken web, and I will talk about anything and everything, except myself. The lovers shall be our first subject, because I have been thinking a good deal about them lately.”

“ Oh !” said Edith, rising for some working implement. “ I don’t know what there is to be said about them. Their fate is sealed—their horoscope has been cast—the sisters of Destiny have done weaving for them ; and, as their fabric is a very bright and charming one, we may as well leave it as it is—besides, love is such a stupid subject. Suggest something else, Alick.”

“ By-and-bye ; but I want first to ask you why you think the fabric of these lovers such a very bright and charming one.”

“ Surely, it is clear enough. Is not your

sister as near perfection as a poor mortal can be—beautiful as a houri, and good as an angel; and is she not devoted, heart and soul, to the object of her choice? And have they not abundance of this world's wealth, and youth, and friends, and—in short, everything to make them as happy as the day is long?"

"But you have left out all Stuart's qualifications, Edith. Have you no word of praise for him?"

Edith turned away rather impatiently from the questioner, as though the subject was too trivial to be worthy of a thought.

"Oh!" she said, presently, "I don't doubt his merits—Nettia's affection is a sufficient guarantee for Sir Stuart Bernarde's worthiness. Do you know, my good sister Margaret, raves about the perfections, the moral perfections, of Miss Egerton. I am quite jealous sometimes!"

“They are kindred spirits I should think.”

“Yes, *such* friends—it is really delightful to see their attachment to each other—Well, well, these last six weeks have worked many wonders—what will the next bring forth ?”

Alick sighed bitterly, but forbore alluding to himself again—and Edith went on with the subject.

“You see my sister and yours have the same opinions on so many points—they are both so serious and yet so cheerful ; so good and yet so agreeable. Unquestionably they have hit upon the philosopher’s stone ; but I do wish they would give a bit of it to you and me, Alick.”

“Do you think Miss Lascelles will ever marry ?” asked Alick, suddenly, without noticing the other’s observation.

“I fear not, unless she takes pity on poor cousin Joseph—he is a great favourite of hers ; and you know we never see anybody here.”

“ Yet you will be certain to marry some day, Edith.”

It would be difficult to say whether the speaker or the listener blushed the deepest as these words were uttered ; but they could not be recalled, and they must be replied to. In a very rapid and confused manner the answer came at last.

“ I am not at all sure of that, indeed the chances are—of course the chances are greatly against it—I believe I shall prefer a single life.”

Alick looked at her earnestly, and the colour came and went rapidly on his own wasted cheek—once he half raised himself on the couch, and, as if by an irresistible impulse, stretched out his hand, while an almost unearthly light gleamed in his large, mournful eyes—but the next moment he was leaning back again, pale as death, and with an expression of even more settled gloom than had appeared on his countenance before.

But Edith was apparently too full of her

own feelings to remark anything of this— She had become restless now, and after wandering for a few minutes round the room, settling the flowers, and diminishing the too glaring light, she told Alick he must do without her for a little while, as she had promised to take a short stroll with her father, before the heat of the day came on.

“Margaret will come to you, when her household duties are over,” she said in bidding him adieu, “and you must be very good and keep quite quiet for the evening—If Mrs. Boisragon arrives you will have to entertain—let me see—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, people, besides myself—and I shall be a very exacting guest, you may depend upon it.”

“But sometimes, Edith, the guests have a duty to perform as well as the host—and you have a promise to fulfil to-night, remember.”

“Yes, yes, I will sing to you, whether

our party is here or not—and now farewell.”

The young man was again alone ; but he looked no more at the smiling summer prospect, nor at the luxuries scattered around him, nor even at the sweet fragrant flowers, the “ladye of his love,” had brought—Only from these he separated the sprig of hawthorn, and pressing it tightly (heedless of the sharp thorns) in his thin hands, he closed his eyes, and—thought !

CHAPTER XX.

EXPLANATION.

So while this really unfortunate young man is musing bitterly over his blighted life, murmuring even a little at the taste of the cup that has been presented to him (for amiable and beloved as he was, Alick had but a poor, weak, erring heart after all) and Edith is wandering alone about the quiet gardens, the promise to her father having been, as you may have guessed, an impromptu fiction—I must endeavour to give

a rather clearer notion of the occurrences of the last six weeks, than you will have been able to gather from the conversation between the invalid and his young nurse.

For nearly a fortnight Alick's recovery had continued doubtful, though there was, during all this time, a slight leaning on the minds of the medical men who attended him, towards the favourable side of his case. The head had received no vital injuries, and the strong fever that came on was considered more the consequence of the bruises inflicted on his chest, than as relating in any way to the brain, though this, of course, became affected during the rapid progress of the fever.

Sir Stuart Bernarde and Nettia both agreed in the wisdom of concealing from Mrs. Boisragon her son's illness, until his recovery should be declared hopeless or the reverse. They judged by their own sufferings what her's would be, and generously resolved to spare her, at least, the wearing horrors of suspense, if they could do nothing

else. In the the mean time Alick had no lack of nurses, or of the most tender and affectionate care. Nettia took up her abode entirely at the Manor House, and the good old aunts came daily to do their part in watching and tending the beloved invalid. Neither were Margaret and Edith inactive during this season of real affliction. The Armstrongs fortunately grew tired of the domestic gloom, and when Monsieur de la Tour was recalled by his tutor they made an excuse for departing at the same time, quite heedless of Joseph's regrets and expostulations. Thus there was nothing to interfere with the sisters' benevolent duties, and even Major Lascelles came at length to take an interest in the guests who had been in a manner forced upon him, but whose sufferings were deep enough to warm the heart of this almost misanthropical old man.

They were all in different ways rewarded for their sympathy and self sacrifice, when the physician in chief pronounced those

cheering words. "He will do now, every symptom of danger has disappeared," and though as days passed on, and the invalid seemed to make little progress towards health, the village surgeons (who still attended regularly) somewhat disputed the decided opinion of their superior, the little band of anxious watchers were not to be discouraged; and poor Alick himself was the only one in whose breast hope had not made an abiding place. It might be that his eyes were still too dim to discern this heavenly visitant, or it might be that all his vision was engrossed by the fairy-like figure which, now that he was removed to an invalid couch in a more airy apartment, occasionally smoothed his pillows, and brought him cool drinks, or read to him in a low, gentle voice, when he was sufficiently free from pain to listen. Certain it was that this, his youngest, nurse possessed greater powers of soothing than any of the others, even than his own good and loving sister Nettia, who evinced no jealousy however at

this very manifest preference, but seemed, on the contrary, to derive the greatest possible pleasure from the circumstance.

And Edith, the spoiled, wayward, vain, and conquest seeking Edith, was content to lay aside all her woman weaknesses now, and appear in a new and infinitely more attractive character.

She was content to sit, hour after hour, in that half darkened room, ministering to the amusements of an often capricious, always gloomy invalid, and this while the bright sun was shining gloriously without, and the birds were singing, and the brooks were murmuring, and nature was rapidly assuming that garb in which she so loved to worship it. But you will say, perhaps, there was no merit in her conduct, since she had been more than half in love with Alick Boisragon before this terrible accident occurred, and that suffering should have the effect of endearing one human being to another, and that where love exists, there can be no sacrifice.

Now, my young friends, I am not going to dispute the justice of your arguments, nor yet to explain, at present, why, in this case, they will not hold good. I shall only assert, that Edith's conduct was not so destitute of merit, as you may suppose, and that, in my opinion, it certainly deserved to be laid in the scale set apart for deeds of virtue.]

But the sun went on shining, and the birds went on singing, while the cheeks of Edith and Nettia grew pale as the lilies that were blooming, unnoticed, in the neglected garden. So, at last, Sir Stuart Bernarde and Margaret began to exert their authority, and these *devotees* to the sick room, were driven forth into the pure air, whether they would or no. But, as it was soon discovered that they abridged this very necessary recreation, day by day, the lover and the sister formed the plan of accompanying these obstinate young people in their excursions, while the aunts, and,

sometimes, even Major Lascelles himself, supplied their places in poor Alick's darkened chamber.

Thus it was, that a friendship had sprung up between Margaret Lascelles and Antoinette Egerton, and though, when they started on their rambles, it was almost always Nettia and her lover who walked side by side, it not unfrequently happened that in returning, the former was seen in earnest conversation with her friend, while the lover was left, with Edith on his arm, to follow slowly in the rear.

Which of the party were most instrumental in effecting this change, I am not prepared to say ; but I know that the two who had struck up such an apparently sudden friendship, obtained the credit of it, and, of course, this was as it should be. Without doubt, it must have been exceedingly tiresome and trying to Sir Stuart Bernarde and Edith, to find themselves thus constantly forced upon each other ;

but I can confidently assert, that they made no open complaints, which was very considerate and kind on their parts.

And all this while, poor, dear Alick, oppressed by physical suffering, lay on his weary couch, nursing the gloomiest and most unhealthy fancies, and encouraging, feeding on, the most ardent, enthusiastic passion that ever glowed in a human heart. It was the intensity of this devotion that caused him, more than anything else, to dwell with such exceeding bitterness on the change his accident had wrought in him. It is quite certain that very serious illnesses will often weaken the strongest minds, and incapacitate them for the smallest of those exertions, which had previously been the very soul of life to them; but it is equally certain that, unless there remains any vital disease, all this will, in time, pass away, where there exists an earnest will to expel it. Alick, however, could discern nothing but clouds and dark-

ness in the future, for he believed, as you have seen in his own observations to Edith, that a vital disease *had* been sown, not only in his body, but in his mind; and it was this unhappy impression that his friends were now labouring so earnestly to efface.

Margaret was of opinion, that religion alone could effectually accomplish his cure, but Nettia and the aunts imagined it might be effected by a worthy and fortunate attachment. Both Sir Stuart and Edith distrusted their own judgment, and said very little about the matter; though they were far from being the least anxious of the party.

But now that his progress towards recovery appeared no longer a subject of doubt, even in the minds of the cautious village surgeons, it was deemed advisable to write to Mrs. Boisragon; and, guardedly as the communication was made, this good and tender mother could not rest satisfied,

or enjoy a moment's peace, till she had seen her son, her youngest and well-beloved one.

It was the day her arrival was expected, that I have chosen to draw up the curtain, and show you some of the actors in the little drama, part of which I have just been trying to explain to you. I shall now leave you to unravel all the other tangled threads yourself, and, I hope sincerely, the occupation may not prove entirely devoid of interest and amusement.

CHAPTER XXI.

TWO MEETINGS.

THE meeting between the mother and son was over, but they were still in close and earnest conference in the same apartment, where we have seen Alick in the morning, while Nettia and Edith were strolling together on the beautiful terrace, under the shade of the tall chesnuts; waiting the arrival of the rest of the party from the cottage.

We will walk behind the two young ladies, and listen for awhile to their conversation. Edith is speaking now.

“I am really quite miserable at the thoughts of losing you, Nettia, for though you will come often, it is, you know, altogether a different thing from having a person staying in the same house. I cannot see why your mama’s coming should drive you away.”

“My dear mother is so fearful of intruding—of increasing the debt we already owe you and yours, Edith,” replied her companion, “that she will not hear of our both staying at the same time ; and soon, I am sure, you will rejoice at the exchange—you will love mama, I know, Edith.”

“That I do not doubt ; but I have rather a liking for you too, Annie—though I dare say you are, with your accustomed humility, incredulous of the fact. As for Margaret, she will resemble a flower deprived of the sun’s rays, when you are gone—to say

nothing of Alick, who, perhaps, will miss you more than any of us."

"Ah, Edith, you know, better than I can tell you, that Alick could miss nobody while he still had you with him."

To this, Edith made no reply, but she looked far more annoyed than pleased at the observation, and after a few minutes' pause, Nettia, in rather an embarrassed, hurried, yet very earnest manner, resumed,

"It may be a long time before we have an opportunity of a private *tête-a-tête* again, Edith, so I will say now, what has been for some weeks on my mind to say to you—I hope you will not be angry, or think I am taking an unwarrantable liberty, for indeed my motive is a good one ; and when there is so much at stake, we ought to risk more than in ordinary cases would be advisable."

This was rather a formidable preface to the subject about to be discussed, and it is to be presumed that Edith thought so too, for her colour came and went very rapidly

while Nettia was speaking, and that part of the terrace they were then traversing was strewn with the leaves of a beautiful monthly rose she had been carrying in her hand. But the moment Miss Egerton came to a pause, her companion, with a slight tincture of haughtiness in her tone, said eagerly,

“*Pray* make no apologies for doing what you think your duty—I am all attention.”

“Well then, Edith, I have long wished to warn you against being too kind—too gentle—too fascinating, in short—to my poor brother—I am betraying no confidence when I say he loves you, with all the intensity and fervour of his very enthusiastic nature ; for in the first place, he has never breathed a word to me on the subject, and more than that, it is plain to every one. Now I am quite sure that hitherto your conduct towards him has been actuated by the purest and most disinterested benevolence, and believe me, I am more grateful to you for this than I could ever tell you—

but feeling for you as he does at present, every word of gentle kindness is dangerous to him. If Alick is once suffered to hope, and this hope prove a false one, Edith, it is my firm persuasion he will never—never get over it.”

Miss Egerton had every reason to be satisfied with the patience of her listener, who, strange to say, evinced infinitely less embarrassment at the concluding part, than she had done at the commencement of Nettia’s speech, and her reply, though perhaps less satisfactory than the other could have desired, was perfectly calm, and free from hesitation.

“Heaven forbid, Annie, that I should ever mislead any human being in a matter of this kind—least of all your brother.”

“Not intentionally, I am sure, Edith,” Nettia said again, “but a person like Alick would be so easily carried away by the warmth of his own feelings. At present I do not believe he cherishes the faintest spark of hope; but if it were once lighted,

I know how rapidly it would kindle into a blaze, which would cost his life in extinguishing."

Now Edith did her friend a great injustice here, by supposing that Nettia's object, in speaking as she did, was to find out whether she had any warmer feeling than regard towards Alick. Even if this had been the case, there would have been, I think, nothing very extraordinary or reprehensible in it; but Edith was highly indignant at what she chose to consider a settled plan for getting at her secrets, and she replied lightly and coldly.

"Oh! you do so exaggerate things with your romantic notions. Rest in peace. Your brother's happiness is in no danger through me, I assure you."

Nettia was pained and surprised by this equivocal answer, and she said no more, but Edith had got into a disagreeable, teasing mood; and presently she went on in the same light, careless way.

"Now that we have begun upon this

subject, Nettia, (I'll be bound you and Margaret would not talk about it for the world) let me ask you, whether you think men or women the most disposed to constancy in matters of the heart."

Miss Egerton remained silent for a moment, but on Edith's repetition of the question, she replied quietly—

"I am scarcely capable of giving an opinion about the matter, because I have had so very little experience, and seen so very little of the world—but judging from myself I should say inconstancy was almost impossible to a woman, except in the case of discovering unworthiness in the object of her affection."

"Ah that is charming;" said Edith, in a slightly ironical tone, "but then, unfortunately, all women are not like you, Nettia; so you would be entirely misled in your judgment of human nature, if you took yourself as a specimen. However, we will leave women now, and pass on to the men,

our masters! Does it appear to you that inconstancy is impossible to them?"

"Again, Edith, I must plead my ignorance and inexperience; for besides my own brother and Sir Stuart, I have never known half-a-dozen of the other sex intimately."

"Well, but even from these you can surely form some opinion—I do not of course include Sir Stuart, who, by all the laws of love and sentiment, must be faultless in your eyes."

A sudden flush rose to Nettia's cheek, and her step grew firmer and prouder as she answered—

"This is a foolish discussion, Edith, and one, as I have said before, that I am not qualified to enter upon. I think we shall have quite enough to do if we study our own natures, and leave men to study theirs. But you are wrong in supposing I consider Sir Stuart perfect—however, my own faults are too numerous to allow me much time to seek for those of others."

"Well, well, Annie, forgive me for teasing

or trying to tease you ;” exclaimed Edith, with a sudden fit of repentance, inspired by her good angel, “ verily, you are a most excellent creature, and I hope, from the bottom of my own unworthy heart, that you will be as happy and beloved as you deserve to be. And there, as if in answer to my wish, comes one whose mission is to bring you joy and gladness, so now exit the evil genius at the left side, and enter the good one at the right.”

And before Nettia could say a word to stop her, Edith had leapt from the terrace on to the soft turf below, and was half way across the lawn, ere she turned round to nod and smile at the lovers, who were now together.

How few people there are who really know of what their own natures are capable—how few give themselves any trouble to encourage the good impulses, which are constantly, like wandering but beneficent spirits, alighting on human hearts—petitioning for admittance, for a home, for a

place where they may abide for ever. It is generally admitted as a truth that there are seasons in the lives of men, when their outward or worldly destinies, are peculiarly susceptible of improvement, when a little energy, a little careful vigilance will lead them rapidly on to prosperity. And so it is with the inner destiny of the heart and soul. The angel comes and knocks, sometimes even pushes one of his shining wings through an unguarded crevice, lets us see the brightness of his plumage, and offers to become our guest, our friend, our guide till death. Ah! if we have only the grace and the wisdom to take him at his word, to open wide the closed doors of our hearts, to draw in the radiant spirit with words of love and welcome—how well it is with us then.

But too often we look coldly and strangely upon the wanderer; we have already made a home for so many of a different nature, with whom we could not now endure to part; this new arrival would only bring

discord and confusion, and so, with scanty thanks for his visit of love, we bid him be-gone, and trouble us no more.

It was to wrestle with one of these spirits who had, to speak the truth, made his appearance as unexpectedly as he was unwished for, that Edith sought out a quiet spot where she could be alone with all the clamouring thoughts, roused into such sudden strife by the angel's knock. And here for the present we will leave her, wishing hearty success to the angel; and return to the lovers on the terrace.

"So it seems I have frightened away your companion," was the salutation of Sir Stuart, spoken in that tone of pique, which the most sensible man breathing cannot avoid, when his vanity has received the slightest wound.

Nettia had greater command over herself (for we must not suppose she was really indifferent to this unlover-like greeting), and replied calmly, though her lips were a little pale—

“ I should scarcely think that fear had anything to do with Edith’s sudden departure—but where are my aunts? did you arrive alone?”

“ Yes!” answered the gentleman, shaking off his momentary chagrin. “ I was anxious to know how Alick had borne the meeting with his mother.”

“ And have you seen him and mama?”

“ I come from them now. Mrs. Boisragon appears greatly agitated, but Alick looks better than he has done yet, calmer and happier. The Major and Miss Lascelles have just joined them, and I was deputed to bring in you and your young friend—Will you come, Annie?”

As Sir Stuart spoke, he passed his arm round Nettia’s waist, and his look and manner resumed much of their wonted tenderness; but though his attentions were not repulsed, they did not appear to excite any of that emotion which brightens the eye, and mantles in the cheek, and imparts to the whole countenance a glow of beaming

joy. On the contrary, Nettia's face wore a sadder and more thoughtful expression than usual, and gently disengaging herself, after a few minutes, from Stuart's encircling arm, she said, without looking at her lover—

“ I will go in at once, but I think you had better find Edith, and tell her we are all assembling now—She went straight across the lawn towards the new plantation.”

Whether this mission was an agreeable one or the reverse to Sir Stuart, Nettia did not take any pains to discover. Without even turning round to ascertain if he had obeyed her, she walked quickly along the terrace, and entered at the glass door of her brother's room, just as her aunts and uncle had made their appearance through the other.

In the meantime Sir Stuart Bernarde, after watching her retreating figure for a few minutes with his brows contracted, and the natural gravity of his countenance converted into positive gloom, turned away in

an opposite direction, and began his search for Miss Lascelles.

It was not a long one. Pacing rapidly up and down a thick avenue of newly planted cedars, the young lady was discovered; but so interesting were her own thoughts, or so dormant her outward senses, that she neither saw nor heard Sir Stuart, until he stood within a few paces of the spot where she had come to a momentary halt, and his voice broke the stillness of that solitude, which the cawing rooks alone had disturbed before.

“I have been sent to look for you,” he said, in the coldest and most indifferent tone you can possibly imagine. “It is getting chilly now; and they are all expecting you in doors.”

Edith was evidently quite unprepared for this intrusion, for the blood rushed to her face, then suddenly retreated, as Sir Stuart spoke; and it was some seconds before she had regained sufficient command over herself

to make any reply. At length she said, with a forced and uncertain smile—

“ Good evening, Sir Stuart, for I have not forgotten that this is our first meeting to-day, which I suppose from your manner is the case with yourself.”

The gentleman now looked discomposed and embarrassed in his turn.

“ It is true,” he said, “ that I had forgotten when I saw you last, and to this you must attribute my unceremonious address. Will you take my arm?”

“ Oh, no !” replied Edith, becoming more at her ease, “ let us dispense with ceremony altogether. Where is Annie?”

“ She is gone in.”

“ We shall be quite a large party, to-night?”

“ We shall, indeed.”

“ I hope it will not be too exciting for Alick.”

“ Indeed, I hope not.”

“ How cold and damp the air begins to feel.”

"Yes, I fear so ; and you have no shawl."

"I seldom take cold. I have a constitution of iron."

Sir Stuart either could not think of anything to say in reply to this, or his thoughts were beginning to wander—for now a profound silence prevailed until they were within a few yards of the house, and then, suddenly turning to his companion, he said,

"You have not forgotten your promise of singing this evening?"

And Edith answered—

"No—Alick reckons on it so entirely, that I would not, for the world, disappoint him."

"Alick—yes—but was not the promise made to *me*."

"Oh ! it might have been to you too—but the one I was thinking of, was made to Alick."

There was no reply to this—not a word, not a look—but when Edith, who was get-

ting a little in advance of her companion, reached the door they were to enter at, and turned round to allow him the privilege of opening it for her, she discovered that she was alone.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE INVALID'S PARTY.

"I SENT Stuart to look for you," said Nettie, as soon as she had an opportunity of speaking apart to Edith, "did you not meet him on the lawn?"

"No—he found me in the plantation, and we returned together. I missed him suddenly on the terrace, so I presume he is staying behind to gaze at the moon. Go to him, Annie, and bring him in to tea."

Whether this advice would have been followed, had Nettia's judgment stood alone in the matter, I cannot pretend to say, but Mrs. Boisragon, having overheard Edith's explanation, turned in some surprise, to look at her daughter, who, rather than endure her fond mother's anxious scrutiny, at that particular moment, rose quickly and went out of the room, while Edith took her place between Alick and Margaret, Mrs. Boisragon being seated on the other side of her son.

The invalid, whose spirits had so long resisted every effort of his friends to cheer them, was scarcely recognizable this evening; and, instead of requiring amusement himself, he it was, who formed the life of the party; enchanting those who knew and loved him, and rousing even Major Lascelles from his usual apathy into a pleased, though silent, attention. As for the three Cargills, they were positively overcome, at what appeared to them, such a sudden and miraculous change; and the

youngest sister whispered to her brother, that it was her firm belief that Miss Edith Lascelles had consented to marry their darling nephew ; and that there would be two weddings in the family at the same time."

"I should think, Eliza, that Mrs. Boisragon's presence would be quite sufficient to account for Alick's charming spirits," replied Mr. Simeon, who was suspected, with some reason, of having, in days gone by, made his quiet, handsome cousin, the lonely star of his idolatry.

"Well, we shall see who's right," said again Miss Eliza. "For my own part, I've always had my dreams on this subject !"

Margaret Lascelles was already seated at the tea-table, when Sir Stuart Bernarde came in thoughtfully and alone.

"Where is my Nettia ?" exclaimed Mrs. Boisragon, quickly ; "she went to seek you, Sir Stuart."

“Did she?” he replied, glancing rapidly round the room; and then sitting down by the taciturn major. “That is unfortunate; for I have not seen her or any one, since I left Miss Lascelles on the terrace.”

The mother watched her future son-in-law narrowly while he spoke; her pale cheek even flushed a little with some thought that had suddenly arisen in her mind; and when Sir Stuart turned to make an observation to Major Lascelles, Mrs. Boisson directed her earnest, penetrating gaze towards Edith, with whom she had recently been conversing. And Edith was very watchful too; and she read clearly in the hearts of many of the assembled party. She saw distinctly that mischief had been wrought—that the “golden fruit” had been cast upon the board—and she needed not to ask herself by whom? For once, however, it seemed that the angel had wrestled successfully—that the good had triumphed

for awhile over the evil in this ill-disciplined heart—otherwise, the smile that met Mrs. Boisragon's almost severely enquiring glance could scarcely have been so full of gentleness and calm self-approbation as it was.

“Upon my word, we are a regular hide-and-seek party,” she said, with well assumed, if not real, animation. “I will go and fetch Annie now, Mrs. Boisragon; and then, I think, we had better lock the doors, that there may be no more escapes to-night!”

There must, certainly, be some sort of freemasonry between young, unmarried women—for they have (I mean the intelligent amongst them) a wonderful facility in getting at each other's secrets—and where the cleverest man in the world would grope about darkly, for an indefinite time—and, perhaps, even in the end, fail in reaching the light, a young girl will walk straight to it, as easily as if she held a well-trimmed lamp in her hand.

Thus it was, I suppose, that Edith, instead of seeking Miss Egerton in the now moon-lighted gardens, whither she was supposed to have gone, went, at once, to the young lady's own room, and found her seated by an open window, in an attitude that told plainly of that dejection of the heart which costs the sufferer such infinite difficulty to conceal.

"Come Annie, dear," said Edith, standing only in the doorway, "those waving trees are very pretty and picturesque in the moonlight; but Sir Stuart must not frighten himself into a nervous fever on that account. He begged me to find you and bring you down-stairs immediately."

Nettia started and looked, first, incredulously at the intruder; but being herself the very soul of truth—and seeing no confusion in Edith's face, she smiled through the tears, that no heroism had been able to restrain, and said she would come at once.

Then Edith passed her arm caressingly

round the waist of her good, unsuspecting friend, and whispering, in a half-playful, half-mysterious, way,

“ We are all going to be so happy, now,” drew her gently down stairs, and into the room where Sir Stuart still sat moodily by the side of Major Lascelles ; and Alick talked and laughed for the entertainment of the whole party.

It might have struck Nettia that, considering her lover’s imputed anxiety concerning her absence, he manifested wondrously little satisfaction in her presence—for he made no attempt to change his seat when she came in, and only smiled faintly at both the young ladies ; but Miss Egerton was, as I have told you before, one of the most modest individuals in the whole world—and she was never on the watch—as so many of her sex most unwisely are—for those petty slights and negligences on the part of others, to which all must occasionally be subjected. It was quite enough for her

to believe that Sir Stuart *had* been anxious—and, indeed, after the restless state her mind had been in for some time past, this conviction was positive happiness to her. Mrs. Boisragon, good, tender mother that she was, looked smilingly now on both her children; and persuaded herself that Sir Stuart's moodiness was but a passing cloud, which Nettia's smiles would easily dispel.

Another charm, however, is to be tried at present. Alick's earnest entreaties cannot be resisted—silence is proclaimed throughout the room, and Edith's voice thrills to the very hearts of nearly all her listeners. At first, it was a wild Italian melody, rapid, passionate, and exciting—then, without pausing to hear the praises that it was so easy to read in every eager face, she ran her fingers through a brilliant prelude, and when the scarcely breathing audience anticipated something even more sparkling and animated than the last—commenced, in tones of unimaginable sweetness and melancholy,

those exquisite words of our most gifted English poetess, "Love Not."

Perhaps this was an unwise selection—some might even have thought it a cruel one, when they saw the effect produced on two or three of that little party by the plaintive melody, and its admirably adapted words; but Edith sang on, unconscious apparently of the various emotions she had called into life, and intent only on affording the pleasure of a moment.

When this song was finished, she left the piano, and went and seated herself near Major Lascelles, who was dreaming again of his lost Emily, and of the many strange events of his chequered life, that the magic of sound had summoned in phantom guise before him. But the old man was not the only one who had yielded to music's mysterious spell, and to whom the present was but as a hazy mist, through which the past revealed itself with formidable distinctness. Sir Stuart Bernarde was no longer absent or moody, for his cheek was

flushed, and his pale eye bright, and he had sought the side of his grave and gentle Annie, though his gaze remained rivetted, as if by some powerful fascination, on her who had sung ‘those witching strains.’”

As for Alick, he seemed positively under the spell of enchantment, and if, instead of Edith Lascelles, St. Cecilia herself had come down to surprise and electrify him with her heavenly strains, he could not have testified more gratitude, or more deep and reverential admiration.

“Mother, it is an angel!” he exclaimed, in the passionate excitement of the moment; and as the mother clasped his burning hand, and looked into his kindling eyes, she prayed silently that this angel might not prove a destroying one to the child of her unutterable love.

As nobody appeared disposed to resume the light style of conversation that had been going on before, (all being, more or less, affected by Edith’s melancholy song) the party soon after this separated. Some

to repose peacefully, and dream of the morrow's quiet duties or enjoyments ; and others to toss restlessly on their weary beds, exhausting themselves in vain conjectures as to their future fate, and to dream, if they could sleep at all, of the storms they would have to encounter, ere their feet could touch the blessed shores of contentment, and their tired eyelids open upon unclouded skies.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A LADY'S PROPOSAL.

Two scenes took place on the morrow, which, whether the results of the previous night's reflections, or of more matured resolutions, greatly affected the destinies of those engaged in them. In the first, there were but two actors—Sir Stuart Bernarde, and Alick Boisragon.

The former rode over to see his cousin at a much earlier hour than usual; but there was no difficulty about gaining admit-

tance ; and Alick, very pale and exhausted from his recent excitement, and a sleepless night, received his cousin with a smile that mocked itself.

“ You are worse to-day, my poor fellow,” began the early guest, sitting down near the bed, and looking earnestly at his young relative—“and you never can get well till your mind gives over these feverish struggles, which are destroying the little life your illness has left in you. There are some things which seem foolish when spoken of between man and man ; but that which affects the moral and physical health of any human being becomes a serious matter, however regarded in the world. Now I don’t want to pry into your secrets, or to extort a single confession—but Alick, old boy, take my urgent and most friendly counsel.—Ask Edith Lascelles to be your wife, and let her nurse you, and sing to you, and sit by your fire-side and make you happy.”

Could any language express the wild

rush of emotions that swept over poor Alick's soul while listening to his cousin's most unexpected and most startling speech, or could any pencil paint the lightning changes of that most speaking countenance when the pause came, and he tried to gather into a comprehensive form what had been so rapidly and abruptly uttered. Far easier it would be to catch the look of cold, steady determination, that marked the aspect of the elder cousin, as he turned away to watch the buzzing flies outside the sunny window, while Alick reflected upon his words. At last an unconnected, nervous, scarcely audible answer came.

“It is a madness of my poor feeble brain—a continuation of one of those torturing dreams. But no, no, I am awake, and you have been mocking my foolish, foolish, passion for an angel ; or, if not, you must be dreaming too—Stuart, what can you mean ?”

Quietly, soberly, and yet more seriously than before, Sir Stuart repeated what he

had said, and at length Alick was brought to comprehend and even to argue upon it, if argument it could be called, which consisted of vehement denials of the very possibility of his ever attaining to the happiness his companion exhorted him to wrestle for. It was thus they went on.

“But you admit, Alick, that my plan, if it prove successful, would bring you health and happiness.”

“Ask a man whose lips are parched and blackened from thirst, if clear, sparkling water would give him ease.”

“Then surely, surely, it must be worth a trial. Women should be wooed before they are won.”

“But look at me—could I ask her who might draw the whole world to her feet, to come and share poverty, obscurity, and perhaps sickness with me? Could I say—leave all the triumphs that are in store for you, renounce all the sweet dreams of your beautiful youth, and convert yourself into the wife of a man whom disease has

brought to the very threshold of the tomb, whose mind as well as his body, is enfeebled and confused from suffering, who has nothing but an insane love to offer for all that you will bestow, in bestowing yourself upon him—No, no, urge anything but this, Stuart, and I will admit its reason.”

“I will not give up even yet, for I have both reason and wisdom on my side. If there would be any reality in the sacrifice you talk of, so much the better for my case. Women of imaginative minds like the idea of renouncing the pomps and vanities of the world for us unworthy men—the thought that they have done so, endears us to them—they are such fond and clinging, yet capricious and mysterious creatures. Take courage then and offer yourself to her at once. If *she* says yes, every difficulty will be conquered, for no one belonging to her resists the determined will enshrined in that slightest of mortal frames.”

“But again, I have no home to offer her,

no profession even, no certain means of ever possessing a shilling I can call my own. Do not shut your eyes to the utter madness of what you have been suggesting."

"Alick, my boy, have I not always looked upon you as a younger brother or a son, and is there not sufficient out of my abundance to give you a home and a profession, and whatever you may consider necessary to put you on a par, as regards worldly circumstances, with the daughter of Major Lascelles. My good little Annie will never miss that which adds to her brother's comfort and happiness."

"Stuart, your generosity is not new to me, but I should despise myself did I dream for one moment of taking advantage of it. No, no, I would work, toil, slave, while a drop of blood yet flowed in my veins; nay, any man would do that for a woman he loved—but I would do it joyfully, and in a tenfold degree—I would submit to every hardship, every privation, every species of servitude for an indefinite

number of years to win Edith Lascelles—but I could not go to her enriched with another man's wealth, and say 'Take me, and let us live in the home a friend's charity has provided for us.'"

"My dear fellow, these scruples are only the results of human pride, which incites men to the rash resolve of building up their own temple of fortune, even if the foundation stones must be formed of their flesh and blood. But have your own way when your health is restored. Edith will not love you less, because you have a fancy for sacrificing youth and strength and life at the shrine of independence."

"Now, Stuart, you are becoming cynical, so let us give over this discussion for the present. I will reflect upon all you have urged, and communicate to you the result of my meditations; but whatever these may be, I thank you heartily, for I feel deeply the interest you have shewn in my happiness."

Soon after this the cousins parted; and

while Alick abandoned himself to all the sweet and intoxicating fancies the recent conversation had necessarily inspired, Sir Stuart rode slowly to his solitary home, holding his head as loftily as if he had come from conquering a whole legion of mortal foes. But the proud man thought, and perhaps he was not greatly wrong, that he had this morning achieved a victory which had crowned him with brighter laurels than any he could win in the battle field, and which had cost him more than he should ever in all his future life be called upon to pay again.

The second scene to which I have alluded took place at a later hour of the day, and of this the *dramatis personæ* were Edith and Alick—poor Alick, who had already gone through such an exciting interview in the morning.

These two were again alone together, as on the previous day, Edith having persuaded Mrs. Boisragon to take a short walk with Margaret, while she herself remained

to amuse the invalid. They had been reading a novel that had just arrived with other books from London, and Alick, whose thoughts had been with Edith far more than with the heroine of the romance, was suddenly startled by his companion laying down the book and saying in a low, earnest voice—

“Do you really believe that love is the greatest blessing of life?”

Gracious powers, how wildly his heart began to beat and his face to glow, at this unexpected and abrupt question, which made him fancy for a moment that his whole soul was open to her who sat beside him—the sweet object of his yet concealed adoration, the beautiful syren before whom his heart, mind, spirit, and every faculty of his ardent nature bowed in enthusiastic worship.

“Oh it is far more than this,” he said at last with uncontrollable excitement. “It is paradise itself come down into our hearts, it is the realization of every hope,

the fruition of every desire, it is the very essence of that bliss which our whole lives are spent in seeking—it is the pearl of great price, the *el dorado* of the soul—language cannot express its worth, its blessedness, its infinite and inconceivable sweetness—oh, Edith, your looks say that I am raving ; but women know nothing of such love—”

“And you, Alick?” said Edith, shading her face with the book she still held, “has your experience been so large—can you, at your age, have made such intimate acquaintance with this mysterious enchanter, to whom you have given so many complimentary names? or do you speak from what you have heard?”

“Of mutual love I have had no experience,” replied Alick, with the courage of desperation, “but I can imagine what it would be from—”

“From what, Alick?”

And Edith put down her book, and kneeling by the sofa, raised her sweet,

earnest, and now blushing face, to meet the almost enraptured gaze that was bent upon it, while, in her pretty, childlike manner, she laid the small, fair hand (still disfigured with the scratches of the hawthorn bough) on the trembling arm of her companion.

“From what, Alick?”

At the repetition of this question, so timidly and softly uttered, the young man could no longer restrain the impetuosity of his emotions, or subdue the wild impulse that urged him to lay bare the heart that had so long endured its miseries in silence. And really had the obstacles to his hopes been a thousandfold greater than they were, it was not in flesh and blood to look calmly and coldly upon that kneeling figure, wherein every grace and charm of womanhood were, at that moment, united.

“Edith,” he said, while a perfect storm of intense emotion shook his whole frame—

“Edith, you have forced it from me, and now, come life or death, come eternal joy, or everlasting woe, I must and will tell you, how fondly, wildly, madly I love you—you, the first who has ever touched my heart—the last, the only one to whom that heart will ever bow. I have cherished no hopes, I have dreamt no beautiful dreams, my passion has had nothing but its own fires to feed upon, and they are rapidly consuming my life, and withering up every mental power. I do not ask you to give me hope, the very thought is madness, for what have I to offer? And though I should not hesitate sacrificing my salvation to procure happiness for you, there is no merit in this, Edith, since the love I feel absorbs every other passion of my mortal nature. My sole consolation is in the idea that my death will prove to you the extent of the devotion you have inspired; and I would that I had twenty lives to sacrifice at the same altar.”

Completely overcome by the excitement that had carried him thus far, Alick paused now, and leant back, pale and utterly dejected, on his sofa. Then, Edith, still kneeling, still looking up earnestly into his face, still with the bright blush coming and going upon her own, said rapidly and eagerly—

“Dear Alick, if you really love me so, why don’t you ask me to be your wife?”

Was he dreaming? was he mad? had insanity come at last in the shape of this strong delusion of the senses—or had she, the peerless angel of his imagination, indeed uttered words, whose import was to raise him to the seventh heaven of bliss, to transform all the gathering gloom and darkness of his life into the most rapturous joy and gladness.

“Edith—you are not mocking me?”

There was something so indescribably plaintive in his voice and look, as he put

this question, that the tears started to Edith's eyes, and placing her hand in *his* hand, she said, with genuine warmth and tenderness—

“Heaven forbid, Alick. No, I am more serious than ever I was in my life, and though in offering myself to you, as I have done, I know that I am overstepping the boundary line of modesty and feminine dignity, I believe these transgressions are justified by the circumstances of the case ; and I repeat, that if you will take me, with all my faults and imperfections—*if you conscientiously believe that I can make you happy*, then I will be your wife, and try to justify, in some measure, the far too favourable opinion you have formed of me.”

The whole thing was so sudden and overwhelming to Alick, that, even yet, he could not believe in its reality—he could only see the obstacles that yet existed to the accomplishment of his dearest hopes

and wishes. In a strangely excited and nervous manner he went on—

“But, Edith, beloved, kind, pitying angel that you are, I dare not conceal from you the extent of the sacrifice you propose making. I am penniless, I have as yet no profession, the entire restoration of my health is doubtful. I have no home to take you to—it would be deemed madness were you to link your fate with mine—your father would never consent, your sister would loathe my very name, you yourself, when it was once accomplished, would bitterly repent the heavenly generosity that, in a moment of enthusiasm, had tempted you to the fatal step. No, no, my heart will bless you evermore for this goodness—but it must not, it cannot be.”

“Listen, Alick,” said Edith, now almost as nervous and excited as her companion. “I have not been tempted to this in a moment of enthusiasm, and if *you* are happy,

I never shall, I never can repent it. Your poverty and want of a profession, far from being obstacles, will greatly favour our union—Papa would die were I to leave him, so we can all live together here, until his death, when I shall have enough and more than enough for us both. As for Margaret you know she already loves you as a brother, and her only anxiety is for my happiness. Now are you satisfied, or must I urge anything further to induce you to accept the hand I have so freely offered?"

It would be far beyond the power of language to express the beaming, rapturous joy that shone on Alick's face as Edith finished speaking. It seemed as if Paradise had indeed come down into his heart, and I believe no mortal woman could have remained insensible to the delight of inspiring such transcendent happiness.

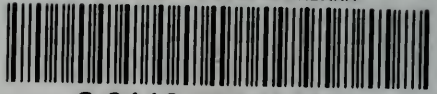
Edith's whole soul was touched, her whole nature subdued, and when Alick, with an

accepted lover's privilege, clasped her in his arms, and murmured words of passionate fondness, she smiled upon him through her thickly falling tears, and assured him that she too was very, very happy.

END OF VOL. I.



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